ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AT THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES: SECULARISATION, BOUNDARIES AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION

Abstract

Several public European universities are currently discussing the possibility of offering courses in Islamic theology with the purpose of educating European imams, Muslim chaplains and teachers. This article presents an analysis of how three different universities in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany argue their point as either pro or con Islamic confessional teaching as a legitimate part of the university system. What discursive boundaries are being drawn around the secular university including and excluding certain subjects? How are they related to the legal and political framework in the respective countries? The article argues that the specific positions Islamic theology is granted are intimately related to how the categories ‘religion’ and «science» are constructed, thus making Islamic theology an interesting boundary marker for the universities.

Key words: Secularisation, Islam, boundaries

The educational challenges for the European universities

What form of education should a public university in a secular society offer? This question has become increasingly important as politicians in several European countries are currently considering the possibility of establishing formalised religious training for imams, Muslim chaplains and teachers. In some countries there is a demand for national imam training, in others the goals is to have ‘homegrown’ teachers for Islamic religious education. A common denominator in most discussions is a fear that a large number of Muslim imams and teachers coming to Europe, often on short resident permits with little or no knowledge of the languages and societies, in which they are to function, will prevent the integration of Muslims into European societies. These discussions constitute part of an ongoing debate on the role and influence of religion in European societies. Two underlying notions in this debate are the issue of integration (Muslims should accept secularisation in order to be properly integrated) and security (certain modes of religious commitment pose a security threat to the European societ-
ies) (Johansen 2006:4; Nielsen, J. 2005). The religious involvement of Muslim citizens is thus becoming an aspect of European politics on integration as well as security.

In this regard, public universities provide an interesting locus for the shaping of future Muslim leaders more in tune with secular conditions. Several European universities – private as well as public – are already offering courses in Islamic theology, in disciplines such as *fiqh* (Islamic law), *hadîth* (the traditions on the life of Muhammad), *aqîda* (dogmatics), and *tafsîr* (Quran commentaries). The institutions mainly use the term ‘theology’ as an equivalent to the concept in a Christian context, covering a wide range of disciplines, as opposed to the narrower concept of *kalâm*. Further, these courses are usually taught from an ‘inside’ perspective and are not placed in the departments of religious studies but at the theological faculties. This is the case in the Netherlands (the Free University in Amsterdam), Germany (the universities in Erlangen-Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Münster and Osnabrück), Austria (IRPA) and Bosnia (University of Sarajevo). The scope of these courses is often to prepare the students to take up a professional position in the Muslim communities as chaplains, imams or teachers. They are thus dealing not only with what Muslims in different epochs and geographical settings have said and done, but also with what Muslims should say and do in order to be good Muslims today (Johansen 2006:15).

For other universities the introduction of this form of Islamic theology is seen as a challenge to secular conditions, as public universities in most European legislations have historically been separated from religious institutions (Brinkman et al. 2003). However, the boundaries of public universities (which subjects should/should not be taught and what influence from different faith communities can be accepted) vary in different countries. It thus appears that European universities do by no means agree on the limits such ‘secular conditions’ represent. This article presents an analysis of the handling of requests for courses that can shape Muslim beliefs and practices in Europe at three different universities: the University of Copenhagen, the Free University in Amsterdam and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

**Questions and data**

During 2005 I conducted research on imam training and Islamic theological studies in Europe. The data from Amsterdam and Erlangen-Nuremberg are taken from my work here (Johansen 2005, 2006). The data were collected through visits to the institutions, interviews with teachers and coordinators, readings of study guides and media presentations. These two cases have been chosen because they represent a positive attitude on behalf of the universities, which in both cases has resulted in the establishing of actual courses. The two cases represent, however, different legal contexts for the universities with regard to confessional teaching. The University of Copenhagen is selected due to an ongoing negotiation, which for the moment has had a negative outcome. Denmark was not included in my original study but Islamic theology was the topic of a conference held in Copenhagen in November 2005, where the possibility of offering an imam course at the University of Copenhagen was discussed by the faculty. I have used
Birgitte Schepelern Johansen: Islamic theology at the European Universities: Secularisation papers and personal notes from the conference along with legal documents and website information from the university to shed some light on the current state of affairs. This means that the material on the Danish case is scarcer but it can nevertheless serve as comparative material and basis for a tentative outline of the premises of the debate.

In the analysis I will address the question of how the universities argue their point as either pro or con Islamic theology, paying special attention to how the categories religion and science are constructed and connected. This will be discussed in relation to the broader legal framework with regard to confessional teaching at the universities in the respective countries.

Secularisation as a social construction of a boundary

It is a central argument in this article that opinions on the role of religion in society tend to be based on certain perceptions of what religion is. The negative view of certain groups’ rejection of separation of religion and politics or religion and law is often linked with a perception of the content of the category ‘religion’ itself (as for that matter, ‘politics’ or ‘law’) that explains and legitimises these separations. This contingency of categories means that their forms and meanings are embedded within specific historical contexts, which is a perspective that rejects any objectively given semantic of the categories (Burr 1995). One of the central ways human reality is constructed is by the establishment of differences and similarities through which objects come into being. It is in such distinctions that notions such as ‘religion’ and ‘science’ become apparent as categories of their own, and these distinctions are conceptual as well as institutional and legal. The focus of interest is therefore how these concepts are constructed by the universities. In the remainder of this article these terms should therefore continuously be understood in implicit quotation-marks.

What are the implications of the social-constructivist perspective for the study of secularisation? Much work on secularisation is informed by what Steve Bruce (2002:2) has called ‘the secularisation paradigm’. At its most basic level the paradigm emphasises the link between modernisation and secularisation where institutional religion loses influence with regard to membership, ritual attendance and political influence, and religious beliefs are replaced by other modes of argumentation as legitimising the way people live and explain their lives. Bruce refers here to the work of Max Weber (1976), Peter Berger (1967), Thomas Luckmann (1970) and Bryan Wilson (1982), and links these processes to rationalisation, the favouring of scientific modes of validation, social differentiation, and individualisation – all of which challenge the influence and position of religion. Within this general framework there are of course differences, because the notion of secularisation has become not only an abstraction from empirical analysis but also a hypothesis about the direction of present-day societies. Is the influence of religion declining or are we witnessing a return of religion (Berger 1999; Bruce 2002; Davie et al. 2003)? If the latter is true, what should count as religion? Does the category of religion include New Age phenomena and self-empowerment courses or...
merely what we might call ‘traditional’ world religions such as Christianity and Islam (Heelas 2000; Luckmann 1970)?

While Bruce has mainly been faithful to the secularisation paradigm – not only on the separation and privatisation but also on the decline – others have more directly challenged the modernisation-secularisation link. Jose Casanova (1994, 2003) has convincingly criticised the thesis that secularisation is a hallmark of a modern society. In his view, European secularisation theories have to a large extent been shaped by the Enlightenment critique of religion as a hindrance to the advancement of science, personal freedom and sovereignty of the people. Besides the causal link between modernisation and secularisation, this has led to an emphasis on the structural connection between institutional secularisation and the decline in personal religious beliefs - leaving for instance the case of America unexplained (Casanova 2003:10).

Differences aside, however, the above-mentioned approaches tend mainly to share a substantive perspective on religion. By this I do not merely refer to the traditional distinction between substantive/exclusive and functional/inclusive definitions of religion (should religion be defined by what it is or by what it does) (see Saler 1993). Rather I follow Arthur Greil and David Bromley (2003:5) who see both definitions as concerned with substance because they grasp what the essentials of the category are – and these essentials might be either form or function. When I classify the above-mentioned work on secularisation as substantive it is thus because, as Talal Asad (1993) has argued, they tend to present ‘religion’ as an object, which may come in many sizes and shapes but which nevertheless can be traced and compared across time and space; it does not cease to be ‘religion’. The definition of religion describes ‘the box’ into which the empirical phenomena are put, but it is seldom in itself the focus of empirical research. More frequently it is regarded as either a matter of philosophical debate – a scholarly ‘favourite sport’ (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001:23) – or methodological pragmatics (see Platvoet and Molendijk 1999).

Instead I would like to suggest that the processes of defining religion should be approached as an empirical field highly relevant to the study of secularisation. A fruitful approach could therefore be to look at secularisation as a fully relational concept, which implies the drawing of a boundary between what is regarded as religion and what is regarded as e.g. science, politics, law – distinctions which simultaneously impose meaning on and separate the categories. These boundaries are not naturally given; they need to be acted, lived, represented and sanctioned in order to sustain themselves, and these productions of institutional, legal and conceptual distinctions can be studied empirically. One such boundary is that which is currently being negotiated at several European universities with regard to Islamic theology.

The University of Copenhagen – a negative

The question of an academically founded course for imams in Denmark has been debated for a number of years, and on several occasions political parties have made suggestions for the establishing of a university-based education, most recently on
March 14th 2006. The government’s response so far has been that the universities should develop the courses they see fit, which is the regular procedure in all university education. The seminar in Copenhagen was an occasion when representatives from the university expressed opinions on the matter in a public forum where press and politicians were present. This means that although the subject-matter and referential arguments might not be representative for the university as such, they form an important contribution to the ongoing production of discourse on the subject.

Faculty members from two faculties at the university presented papers: one from the Theological Faculty and one from the Humanist Faculty. These two discussants were selected because they each represented departments where such a course could possibly be placed. Both argued for a rejection of having a confessional Islamic education at the university – pursuing remarkably similar argumentations. The overall line was that the university is and should be independent of religious organisations and religious beliefs, as they would otherwise threaten both the academic freedom and the university’s obligation regarding anti-discrimination. No faith community can have a say in what is being taught at the university, just as the university can never authorise any religious ministry, as this is a matter for the faith community (Nielsen, K. 2005:2; Simonsen 2005). Likewise, a religious profile cannot be a criterion for the appointment of professors or the acceptance of students on a course. Associate Professor Kirsten Busch Nielsen from the Theological Faculty said:

It is also not possible, and it also should not be possible, for a Danish university to come up with religious or confessional (or political or ideological) requirements vis-à-vis scholars who want to apply for a teaching and research position at the university. The Appointment Order only points to «academic qualifications in research, teaching, communication, etc. stipulated in the job structure» and «other academic and professional requirements» as criteria for appointment (Nielsen, K. 2005:3).

Furthermore, it was stated that the kind of course on Islam that lies within the scope of the university already exists in the Humanist Faculty, which has a long tradition for dealing with subjects like hadîth, fiqh, tafsîr in the departments for Middle East Studies, Arabic Language and Religious Studies. They are characterised by an academic, critical, reflective and humanist approach to the study of Islam, which does not take special interpretations and truth claims into consideration. Associate Professor Jørgen Baek Simonsen from the Humanist Faculty said: «The Muslim students can believe all they want, as long as they are able to conduct a critical analysis that is not based on a religious approach.» The activities of the university are basically that of science, and both participants emphasized the openness and curiosity towards any religion as an object for scientific investigation. The negative response was therefore not directed at Islam as such – any critical research based teaching on Islam was welcomed. It was directed at a certain approach to Islam, namely, the religious one.

In this argumentation a clear distinction was constructed between a religious and an academic approach to the study of Islam as well as between religious and academic qualifications for a scholar. The construction of the category religion was here mostly implicit, as the main concern for the participants was to represent the university, its
tasks and values. However, a central part of this representation lied exactly within the
constant rejection of what was termed a religious approach to religion. In the argumenta-
tion, a set of oppositions became apparent that at the same time established what reli-
gion was not; the university could not engage in religious teaching because it was not
academic, critical, independent or humanist and did not promote a free approach to
research and teaching (because it promoted a certain truth-claim in conflict with ratio-
nal criticism, which it might even attempt to suppress?). This led to a construction of
religion as something that could only be positioned as an object for scientific investi-
gation but which could never be an integrated part of the university’s sphere of author-
ity. It further led to a concept of science that appeared to be ideally neutral or immune
to the impact of other categories like religion or politics. In this respect, the construc-
tion of religion bore resemblance to the notion of religion in many classical secularisa-
tion theories as something that had to be separated from science (Martin 1969:116;
Wilson 1982:149). This notion was related to an understanding of religion as engaged
in super-empirical matters (that can only be believed) as opposed to the empirical foun-
dation of sciences (that can be known).

This distinction between a religious and an academic study of religion is as much a
practical as a conceptual one, effectuated in the legislation and sanctioned by the uni-
versity itself. It is reflected in the University Act’s emphasis on the importance of
freedom of research and the quoted qualifications needed for a university employee,
which logically require a separation when religion is interpreted as outlined above (The
University Act, article 2.2; The Appointment Order, article 5). The distinction is also
effectuated in the legislation for the State Education Fund that does not include the pos-
sibility for religious courses to obtain study grants for their students. On several occa-
sions, suggestions have been made to change the legislation but the response has each
time been negative, most recently on January 12th 2006. The legislation on study grants
is not exclusively relevant for the universities but it is a marker for the boundary
between what can be regarded as part of the public educational system – and here reli-
gion is clearly excluded.

The conceptual distinction also corresponds to a division between the Danish
church and the university: The Theological Faculty is according to its own website a
non-confessional faculty at a state university, although it is shaped by an overall
Lutheran context (http://www.teol.ku.dk/english/). The study should «...enable the
student to work independently and in a qualified manner with Christianity in a his-
torical and present perspective» (http://www.teol.ku.dk/udd/Faginformation%20-
%20Teologi%20005.pdf, my translation). In practice this means that the clergy is not
educated at the university but at the Pastoral Seminary, which, however, is still publicly
funded and requires a degree from a Theological Faculty (Espersen 1999:110), while
the university provides theology as an academic, non-confessional study. Again, the
emphasis is on non-confessionality and independence as hallmarks of science. Since
independence can be discussed with reference to the Danish Lutheran context and the
Danish church, this is rhetorically a clear sign of the acceptable forms of academia in
a Danish university context.
To what extent this boundary between a religious and an academic approach is representative of a more general structure in the university system can scarcely be determined on the basis of the present material. However, the fact remains that although politicians for some years have expressed a desire for the establishment of Danish courses for imams, this has not yet been effectuated, and the arguments presented at the seminar might point to the ways in which religion and science are defined and handled.

The Free University and Erlangen-Nuremberg: two positives

If there is a tendency at the University in Copenhagen to construct a distinction between the religious perspective on the study of Islam that cannot be integrated into a secular university and a study of Islam that can (because it is scientific, academic, open, critical and independent as some of the key-words), the situation is somewhat different in the Netherlands and Germany. In the Netherlands politicians have long discussed the possibility of creating a formalised imam-training as part of the established educational system. These discussions have not least been fuelled by the events of September 11th 2001, the bombings in London and Madrid in 2005 and the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 2nd 2004. They have focused precisely on the above-mentioned link between failed integration, extremism and religious education (Johansen 2005:10). This concern led to a state donation in February 2005 of €1.5 million to the Free University in Amsterdam, originally a Protestant university now subsidised by the state and part of the established university system. The university is presently offering a BA in Islamic theology and an MA in Muslim chaplaincy. In Germany, the intense political discussions have focused more on teachers’ training for Islamic religious education in mosques and public schools than on imams. As a consequence, Islamic theological studies have been established with this aim in mind at four different German universities.

The lines of argumentation from the two institutions are similar, and therefore they will be discussed together in the following section. First of all, it is significant that both institutions present their courses as confessional and that this confessionality constitutes an important part of their academic task. The term confessional is here being used not as referring to the adherence to a specific branch of Islam but as a stance that is broadly founded in the belief that the Qur’an is the word of God. Dr. Hendrik Vroom, coordinator at Centrum voor Islamitische Theologie, the Free University of Amsterdam explains:

You cannot make theological studies of the Qur’an for three years in a neutral manner – if so, it would only be language classes. This kind of teaching can only be done in a confessional setting; otherwise it would be courses in Arabic. At Vrije Universiteit we are not working with teachers of Islamology but with teachers of ethics (Interview, September 28th 2005).
The theological study implies a knowledge that has to do with personal commitment, and the courses aim both at providing knowledge about Islam and at making this knowledge ethically and spiritually relevant in the current setting. It is therefore crucial that the students’ religious commitment is not regarded as suspect or irrelevant to the academic work but is seen as an integrated part of the study. This has obvious consequences for the way in which the adequate qualifications of the teachers are perceived. This leads to a quite different approach to the religious profile of the teaching staff as elaborated by the Dean at the Theological Faculty, Dr. Abraham van de Beek:

On the public universities’ courses in religious studies there are Islamology teachers who are not themselves Muslim. Vrije Universiteit would like to change this by having people who live in the tradition do research and teaching. Through this we could have Catholics, Protestants and Muslims as well, having their own professors explaining what is really at stake for their faith community from an inside perspective (Interview, September 29th 2005).

This is a clear rejection of the distinction drawn in the Danish case between the religious as potentially discriminatory and the academic as a qualification without relation to the religious commitment of the teachers. Here the confessional is integrated as a central part of what the university is supposed to deliver and therefore of the qualifications of the teachers too. The inclusion of the religious commitment into the authority sphere of the university also points to a different construction of the category of science. While the Danish case promoted a notion of science as a coherent entity, characterised by independence and neutrality, shared by and thus marking the boundary of the university system, the Dutch and German cases seem to represent a more hermeneutic and fragmented approach to science in which you «…have to look for the rationality within each tradition», be it secular, Muslim or Christian (Dr. Abraham van de Beek, interview September 29th 2005). A similar point was made by the coordinator of the studies at Erlangen-Nuremberg, Professor Johannes Lähnemann:

The confessional also means getting in touch with the contents. It does not here mean that we give a complete guide to Islamic behaviour, but the students should learn how to make it relevant in social life. And really, there are no subjects in our schools that do not have these aspects of relevance. You can compare it with musical instruction: you cannot give that simply by talking about it. You have to be able to do it yourself… It is ideology to think that you can do scientific work without a standpoint (Interview, November 22nd 2005).

The construction of the confessional as a necessary ‘being able to do it yourself’ raises some interesting questions as to what constitutes academic freedom. Can you teach something with which you disagree or in which you do not believe? Can an atheist professor teach Islamic subjects? Following the line of argumentation at the Danish seminar, the answer must be yes. It is taken for granted that a teacher can and shall be able to teach diverse views, handling disagreements and taking the position as ‘the Devil’s advocate’. In this case, however, the answer takes another form related to what kind of knowledge the teacher is supposed to communicate. If religious commitment is a legitimate and vital part of what is taught, then obviously a non-Muslim professor cannot
teach this commitment, as he or she does not have it. These perceptions of qualifications point not only to different assumptions of what constitutes science but also of what constitutes religion. The first stance tends to categorise the religious as something private – an attitude within the teacher that does not necessarily influence the transmitted knowledge. The religious commitment may influence what is taught, but it does not constitute relevant knowledge in and of itself. The second stance leans more towards categorising the religious as knowledge and thereby as a legitimate and central part of what is taught at a university.

It is in this respect significant that one of the main concerns for the teachers and coordinators at the two universities was to emphasize the legitimacy of their courses from a Muslim perspective in order to assure potential students and Muslim communities that they will provide authentic Islamic teaching. The universities are not running the governments’ errands, disciplining the Muslim students to become properly secularised. The Dean at the Theological Faculty at the Free University explains:

> It is not the project to correct Muslims, as the politicians might want. It is not a matter of enculturation of the Muslims but of the ‘enlightened’ secular people who have to accept a multicultural society (Interview, September 29th 2005).

Here, the confessional approach becomes an important way of legitimising Islamic theology at European universities, because it guarantees an adherence to a religious sense of life common to Muslims as well as Christians.

While there is disagreement at one level on how to regard the relationship between the religious and the academic, at another level the academic approach to Islam at the Dutch and German universities was constructed in similar ways to the one presented at the Danish seminar, namely as a critical and reflective study. The reason why confessional Islamic theology should hold a legitimate position within the university system is because this framework provides an insurance of the academic dialogue between religious traditions. The distinction here seems to be concerned with different forms of knowledge, all of which can generate critical investigation. This construction moves religion from a position of a mere research object to a position of a research approach, which establishes the universities as an institutional framework for diversity.

In Amsterdam as well as in Erlangen-Nuremberg, the view was that a secular approach seen as neutral and more supportive of academic freedom was a questionable ideological position. Especially at the Free University, the critics of the confessional study were refuted by references to the more general assumption that there is no such thing as value-free science. All science is positioned and in that sense ‘confessional’, and the academic obligation is thus to understand the hermeneutics and truth claims of different positions. This line of argumentation is in tune with what the English theologian David Cheetham (2005:31) has called «...the question of epistemological location in post-modern critiques of the secular university». Describing current trends and conflicts within the academic sphere, Cheetham points to the rejection of a universalistic adherence to an academic metanarrative as one of the main tendencies that embraces the wide range of post-colonial studies, deconstructionist theories and theological
objections to a secular normativity. As such, the integration of Islamic theology is presented as openness towards other perceptions of knowledge, thus moving the university beyond ethnocentricity.

The boundaries in the two positive cases are thus drawn differently than in the Danish example. The religious commitment is seen as a legitimate part of an academic study, and this is due to the construction of religion as something that is not intrinsically opposed to knowledge but as one of several forms of knowledge that should be embraced by the universities. At the same time, a distinction is drawn towards those who maintain the ‘secular as neutral’-stance or the perception that confessionality is opposed to academic freedom, since all knowledge is positioned – a distinction which is seen in practice in the prioritising of Muslim teachers. Likewise, all the students in these courses are Muslims, not because it is a requirement but because the courses, not surprisingly, mainly appeal to Muslims.

Turning again to the legal and institutional structures, they seem in both countries to correspond with these conceptual distinctions, though in slightly different ways. In Germany there is a recognition in the Constitution of the right to confessional teaching in public schools (Constitution art. 4 and 7) – a teaching in which the faith community in question is responsible for the curriculum and the hiring of teaching staff (Grundgesetz 2002). As teachers are educated at the university, there is a direct link between this recognition and the openness towards confessional studies at the universities. There is thus a long tradition for cooperation between faith communities (mostly the Catholic and Protestant church) and the university. However, this rests on the fact that there is a recognised faith community with which the university can cooperate. The Constitution does not recognise religion as an abstract phenomenon, only organisations, and although several attempts have been made, it has not yet been possible for any Muslim organisation to obtain recognition at a national level – according to some (Robbers 2000:151). The reason is that the law favours church-like structures which do not exist within Islam. At a local level, though, a representative Muslim body has been recognised for the Federal State of Bavaria and it is with this organisation that the university in Erlangen-Nuremberg cooperates. The university is not a confessional university, but some of the faculties have affiliation with churches – including the Muslim Faith Community of Erlangen. The boundary here is thus not drawn between the faith communities and the university system as in the Danish case but between recognised faith communities that have a legitimate affiliation with the university and those that do not hold such a position.

In the Netherlands several institutional forms of theological education exist. With the formal separation of church and state in 1876, a distinction was drawn between public theology, which should be taught at the state universities, and confessional training, which was taught in seminars run by the churches at, though not within, the universities. This is a model called duplex ordo and is quite similar to the Danish arrangement. It was intended to free the universities of confessional ties as well as the churches of state interference (Vroom 2003:78). However, some of the free churches objected to the notion of neutrality and favoured instead an integrated theological study within a
With regard to imam-training, the formal separation of church and state means that the state cannot initiate religious courses of education. However, as a reminiscence of the ‘pillar system’ the state can recognise already existing institutions affiliated with a recognised religion and grant them status as part of the public educational system (Statham and Koopmans 2004:6). One of the two private Islamic Universities applied for the €1.5 million donation, hoping for such a public recognition, but the government chose the Free University for the task.

The conflict over the assumption that some tenets can be classified as neutral and thus suitable for a public university in a secular state, while others can be designated as confessional and biased is thus fairly old in a Dutch context and has resulted not so much in a distinction between inside and outside the university system as a distinction between different institutional forms within the system. As the legitimacy of a Protestant university offering Islamic theological training was predictably criticised by Dutch Muslims after the government’s decision, this boundary between simplex- and duplex-ordo could be used by the Free University to impose their courses with legitimacy by stating the common ground between Muslims and Christian: the confessional approach.

Islamic theology: a boundary marker

In this article I have posed the question of how three universities in Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany approach the matter of opening the doors for Islamic theology. Further, I have tentatively traced these approaches in the legal framework surrounding the universities in the respective countries. Here it appears that the actual position given the category of religion as a legitimate or illegitimate part of the university system is dependent on how that category is constructed; what religion is and which role religion should play are two sides of the same coin. The dividing line in the present cases goes mainly between a concept of religion as a disposition which must be separated from the academic work, as in the Danish case, and a concept of religion as one valid position among others from which research is done, as in the German and Dutch cases. Furthermore, the former leaves an overall concept of science as a category of its own that ties together the university system (marked by the concept of ‘independence’), while the latter tend to emphasise the discontinuity of science as it is embedded in different hermeneutics (marked by the concept of ‘positioned knowledge’). Overall, these differences seem in tune with the legal frameworks and institutional arrangement that have resulted in different models for how the universities relate to concepts of religion as well as actual faith communities.

The different approaches raise interesting questions of practical relevance: Should religious commitment count as a valid qualification for a university teacher? Is it discriminatory to prefer a Muslim professor for a chair in Islamic theology? I have here intended to show that the answer to this question is linked to different constructions of
religion and science and is therefore inevitably shaped by a whole range of underlying premises of what counts as relevant knowledge in the present situation. Further, it is crucial to ask how the actual teaching will look in either case. Moving beyond rhetoric, are there in practice differences between a course on for instance fiqh at the Free University and at the University of Copenhagen? An obvious criticism of a confessional approach is that it risks emphasising what Islam ought to be at the expense of the actual lives of Muslims. A posed criticism of the non-confessional approach is that it fails to address the questions that are of interest for believing Muslims. However, is this actually the case? This should be a field of obvious interest for further research.

Returning to my initial outline of secularisation as boundary production, all three institutions can at one level be seen as contributing to the construction of secular separation. This is true because they seem to share the substance-approach, viewing the concept of religion as a distinct category. There exist phenomena such as ‘religions’, ‘religious commitment’ and ‘religious groups’ that are used to form the basis of their argumentation. This is emphasised by the fact that all informants tend to use an inside-outside perspective on the category, which is logically based upon the existence of a boundary. The inside-outside tension is well-known in many disciplines but it seems to be especially present with regard to religion (Trigg 1999:112), which may precisely be due to its relationship to the category of science. When science is constructed as sharply separated from religion, an inside perspective must inevitably contaminate academic standards; when science is constructed as a tool to obtain an understanding of ‘a confessional way of life’, the inside perspective becomes indispensable. Despite the differences, by upholding the inside-outside construction, both institutions contribute to the reproduction of the category of religion which can be seen as one of the central features of secularisation – regardless of the claimed anti-secular position of the Free University.

At another level, however, the boundaries are drawn differently in the three cases. Presently, the boundary between the academic and the religious in Denmark has been sustained, leaving the university’s doors to the training of ‘professional Muslims’ closed. In Germany and the Netherlands the boundary seems to be open to both conceptual osmosis and practical cooperation. This diversity in the construction of concepts is what the substance-focused approach to secularisation fails to grasp; that the categories are themselves objects of social contestation and negotiation – that «…religion is not an entity but a claim» (Greil and Bromley 2003:5). With this article I suggest that the traditional questions of secularisation theories (is religion coming or going, are people becoming more or less religious) cannot stand alone. The empirical study of the specific constructions of a concept and its boundaries can here become a fruitful approach to the diversity and contingency of the separating processes making up the complex phenomenon called ‘secular society’.
Notes

1 This approach to the construction of meaning through distinctions has been pursued by a long range of scholars like Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and Niklas Luhmann.

2 It should be noted that modernity as a time-related point of departure for secularisation is contested, see Jacobsen (forthcoming) as an example.

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