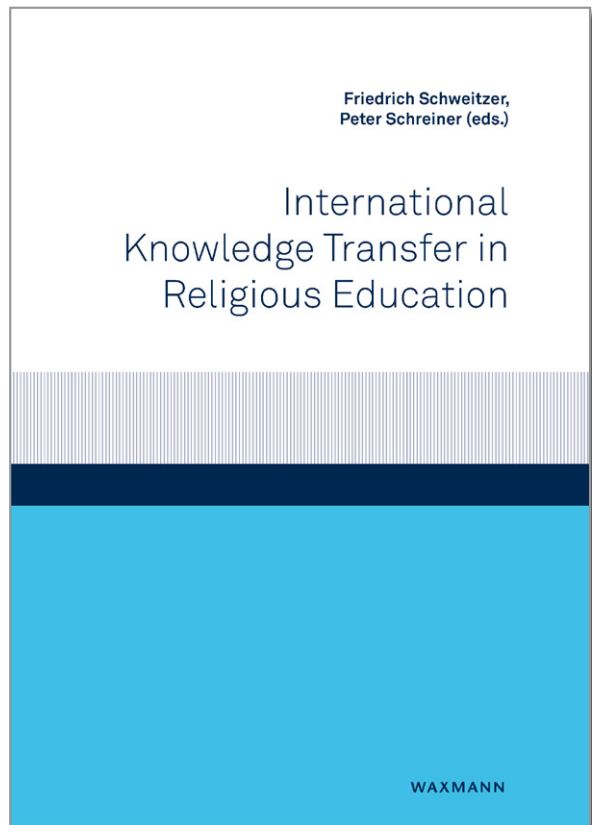


*Fahimah Ulfat*

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# Researching international knowledge transfer in academic Islamic religious education using the example of gender

*Fahimah Ulfat*

## 1. Introduction

This chapter refers to the new discussion on international knowledge transfer in religious education (IKT) which was initiated by a group of European scholars in the field of religious education in October 2018 (cf. Schweitzer and Schreiner 2019). The researchers concluded that although international cooperation in the field of religious education has increased significantly since the 1970s, religious education has not yet reached the point at which one could speak of an integrated international field of research.

Islamic religious education is a young discipline in the German-speaking world which has established itself in the German academic landscape since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is also a discipline that does not belong to the classical canon of Islamic theology. Islamic religious education therefore faces the challenge of establishing itself as a research discipline in such a way that the theoretical and empirical results it produces, as well as their applicability in practice, are of international importance, not only in Muslim contexts but beyond.

It also faces the challenge of entering into an academic exchange with the other disciplines of Islamic theology in order to transfer emancipatory theological knowledge internationally into Muslim religious education concepts in a way that is both professionally and critically reflected.

In the following discussion, “Gender and religion are considered as interdependent categories of knowledge” (Auga 2013, 51). This means “underlining the discourse character of religious knowledge and showing the relationship between dominant versus resistant discourses” (p.58). Religion, as will be shown in the following, is also a “place of the emergence of new knowledge” (p.59). Point 2 will elaborate how “diverse [Muslim] contexts are involved in the production of new emancipatory knowledge” (p. 62), but also how resistant and, to some extent, how innovative discourses that consider themselves traditionalist and ahistorical can be. Point 3 outlines some empirical studies which describe the attitudes and positions of young Muslims in Germany with regard to the topic of gender

justice. This reveals the enormous gap that opens up between Islamic theological work on gender justice and the life practice of these young Muslims. Using this example, the significance of the international transfer of emancipatory theological knowledge into Muslim religious education contexts will be discussed.

Since the late 1980s, the number of publications dealing with Islam and gender has increased rapidly (cf. Ahmed 1993, 2). More than for many other areas, the topic of Islam and gender makes clear how necessary international knowledge transfer is for Muslim religious education work. We find numerous texts on this subject area, some of which are theological, some historical or philological, some from the perspective of cultural and social sciences or of religious studies, etc. These works provide emancipatory theological knowledge that is of particular importance for Islamic religious education and its educational practice. Through the international transfer of knowledge, Islamic religious education in Germany can receive impulses from these disciplines for research and make them fruitful for the practice of religious education.

## 2. Muslim discourses on gender issues

Countless contemporary Muslim intellectuals from the USA, the UK, but also in the meantime from Germany, are increasingly dealing with the question of the connection between Islam and gender justice. In particular, the focus is on legal-theological debates on the topic of gender, since Muslim jurisprudence (fiqh) is such a dominant discipline within Islamic theology that Muslim thinkers and intellectuals assume that the change in the theory of gender equality must be sought in this discipline.

Muslim thinkers and activists engaged in this field are concerned with the question of the connection between Islam, gender justice, social justice and religious pluralism. “At the heart of a progressive Muslim interpretation is a simple yet radical idea: every human life, female and male, Muslim and non-Muslim, rich or poor, ‘Northern’ or ‘Southern’, has exactly the same intrinsic worth. The essential value of human life is God-given, and is in no way connected to culture, geography, or privilege” (Safi 2003, 3). The focus of interest of these thinkers is the establishment of a critical discourse on Muslim traditions in the light of modernity which should provide impulses for Muslim thought and action in the 21st century.

The work of the thinkers and activists reconstructs historical, religious, social and political developments in societies influenced by Islam and their impact on the gender issue. They also describe the reactions of intellectuals and political and religious leaders of Muslim communities to European colonialism and the influence of the ‘West’ on countries influenced by Islam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The reform process that was thereby initiated also had an impact

on the interpretation of the role of Muslim women, on their status and rights (cf. e.g. Badran 1995; Basarudin 2016; Gamper 2011; Ghodsee 2009; Haddad and Esposito 1997; Izharuddin 2017; Marcus 1992; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Nieuwkerk 2006; Roald 2006; Robinson 2008; Selby 2012; Smith and Woodward 2013; Torab 2006; Weber 2013; Willemse 2007).

The works of the thinkers who are active in the field of gender issues outline the developments of religious policy, legal policy and gender policy in societies influenced by Islam in the 20th century, but also the practical efforts for reform in the context of the daily social reality of women. The focus is on the encounter of two value systems, namely pre-modern concepts of justice, rights and gender in comparison to contemporary ideas based on the ideals of human rights and personal autonomy (cf. Mir-Hosseini et al. 2017).

The female dimensions of the divine are already discussed among the earliest Muslim scholars and thinkers because a large part of the manifold divine attributes or qualities in the Quran are grammatically feminine. However, in the linguistic usage for God the male Arabic pronoun “he” is used, even though theologically any form of gender-specific anthropomorphisms is rejected. Sa’diyya Shaikh assumes that patriarchal structures have standardised the “male imagery” and marginalised the “female imagery” for the divine as unthinkable or at least inconsistent (Shaikh 2019). The tacit association of the masculine with the divine does of course have an impact on the perception of the feminine and masculine and the role of man and woman. It becomes apparent, according to Shaikh, that our ideas of the divine nature are inseparably connected with our ideas of human nature and the relations of the sexes to each other (cf. Shaikh 2019).

Shaikh pleads that Muslims need to develop a “more sustaining gender-inclusive theological language” for today’s ethical, religious and spiritual challenges (Shaikh 2019). Many scholars working on gender, justice and Muslim ethics meet this demand. Shaikh herself, for example, has dealt intensively with the question of how the Sufi (mystical) theology could facilitate fundamental changes in Islamic gender ethics and legal formulation, especially in the area of women’s rights regarding marriage, divorce, veiling, and the leading role of women in ritual prayer (cf. Shaikh 2014).

Ziba Mir-Hosseini investigates constructions of gender rights in Islamic legal thought to identify both the legal theories and the assumptions that determine them. She focuses on reconstructing the understanding of religion and the way in which religious knowledge was produced (cf. Mir-Hosseini 2003, 23). She can reconstruct three different discourses on gender rights – “traditionalist”, “neo-traditionalist” and “reformist”. While the first two are based on different forms of legal inequality between the sexes, the third discourse, which has emerged in the last two decades, is characterised by legal equality between the sexes (cf. p. 1).

## 2.1 Three Muslim discourses on gender from a critical perspective: The traditionalists

According to Mir-Hosseini, the driving forces behind the “traditionalist” and “neo-traditionalist” discourses lie in a “non-historical approach to Islamic legal systems and a male-centred religious epistemology” (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 3). Mir-Hosseini criticises the model of Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*) regarding gender relations because it is based on the patriarchal ideology of pre-Islamic Arabia which continued into the Islamic period, albeit in a modified form. Using marriage as an example, Mir-Hosseini shows that in the Quran the status of women is neither decreed as divine nor seen as unchangeable but as a social practice in need of change. According to Mir-Hosseini, Quranic verses are very critical of the low status of women in pre-Islamic Arabia and call for fundamental reforms, especially in the way women are viewed and treated.

This is also confirmed by Kecia Ali, who deals with Muslim jurisprudence, in particular family law (marriage and divorce law). She explains how traditional jurists understood marriage and reveals how Muslim jurisprudence granted husbands a kind of ownership of their wives (cf. Ali 2003, 167). Criticising the gender-specific rights and duties as formulated by the Sunni jurists of the formative ninth century, Ali concludes that the traditional Islamic legal understanding of marriage and divorce is unacceptable from a modern perspective.

In her analysis of changes and variations in discourses on women and gender in the Middle East, Leila Ahmed also shows how practices and concepts relating to gender, which existed on the basis of Judeo-Christian thought in Byzantium and Zoroastrian philosophy in the Sassanid Empire, were also cultivated by Muslims in the Arab world: “Islam explicitly and discreetly affiliated itself with the traditions already in place in the region.” (Ahmed 1993, 5)

Mir-Hosseini criticises the fact that the classical legal scholars were guided by a number of legal and gender-specific assumptions and theories that reflected the state of knowledge and normative values of their time and did not follow the principles of the Quranic reforms which aimed to abolish the practice of the subjugation of women in pre-Islamic marriage. These assumptions and theories continued to be treated by subsequent generations of legal scholars as if they were unalterable: “This epistemological crisis prevails in the realm of women’s rights in Islam. Rather than embodying the *shari’*a ideals, *fiqh* rulings are literal expressions of the classical jurists’ ideal model of family and gender relations, divorced from time and space.” (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 13)

Against the background of these historical studies, it can be critically noted in the margin that Muslims with a traditionalist understanding, who are fighting for the revival of an “Islamic golden age”, are not aware of the fact that very many of their religious concepts are the result of the intellectual work of the ninth to thirteenth century and by no means originated in the era of the Prophet (Harhash 2016, 15).

## 2.2 Three Muslim discourses on gender from a critical perspective: The neo-traditionalists

In the course of the encounter of the Muslim world with the Western colonial powers, the second discourse on the status of women, which Mir-Hosseini calls “Neo-Traditionalist”, emerged. With the emergence of modern nation-states in the Muslim world and the creation of modern legal systems based on Western models in the twentieth century, legal provisions on family and gender rights were “selectively reformed, codified and gradually grafted onto a unified legal system” (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 15). However, according to Mir-Hosseini, the innovations did not fundamentally change the substance of gender rights. Gender equality is still rejected. Instead, the concept of “complementarity” of gender rights and duties is introduced. The argument is that while men and women are created equal and are equal before God, the roles assigned to them in creation are different. Differences in rights and duties would not mean inequality or injustice, they were even “the essence of justice” (p. 17). The legal regulations would not only correspond to the divine plan for Muslim societies but would also be in harmony with human nature (cf. p. 17).

## 2.3 Three Muslim discourses on gender from a critical perspective: The Reformists

At the end of the twentieth century, the progressive links between ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ forms of thought led to a third, reformist discourse that advocated gender equality among Muslims: “This discourse is part of the new, Reformist religious thinking that is consolidating a conception of Islam and modernity as compatible, not opposed, and contends that the human understanding of Islam is flexible, that Islam’s tenets can be interpreted to encourage both pluralism and democracy, and that Islam allows change in the face of time, space and experience.” (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 20) In this discourse, which can be described as emancipatory, the classical gender roles are not seen as a manifestation of divine justice, but as constructions of male jurists that contradict the nature of divine will. Here, according to Mir-Hosseini, a paradigm shift is emerging, which dissolves “the existing connection between sexuality and gender rights” and “can challenge the hegemony of orthodox interpretations” (p. 20–21).

According to Leila Ahmed, this discourse is characterised by socio-economic, political and cultural changes related to the “European influence” in the Middle East in the nineteenth century. It also triggered the first major debate on women and the veil in the Arab world at the end of the nineteenth century. Ahmed shows how in this discourse questions of cultures and classes as well as imperialism and nationalism are fundamentally mixed with the question of women and how

feminist discourses have developed in relation to this in the so-called Muslim world (Ahmed 1993, 3).

Like Mir-Hosseini, Shaheen Serdar Ali also undertakes a historical-critical examination of the Islamic legal tradition. She explains in detail that the Islamic legal tradition is not a “monolithic entity” but allows a variety of interpretations that have far-reaching effects on the rights of women in Islam (Ali, 2000, 3). In addition, she elaborates that “the principles of Islamic law [...] do[es] not consist of an immutable, unchanging set of norms, but have an in-built dynamism that is sensitive and susceptible to changing needs of time” (p.3). She sees the problem in the fact that with modernity a “fossilisation” of Islamic law began which had a negative effect on people and institutions, especially women (p.4). Since rights and duties reflect the culture, traditions and customs of society, patriarchal social orders have developed religious norms that discriminate against women. Thus, undemocratic regimes could legitimise inequality and gender hierarchy. Ali therefore prefers a progressive interpretation of the sources in order to revive the “egalitarian spirit” of Islam (p.5).

## 2.4 Summary

The examination of the topic gives an insight into the complexity of the connections between Islam, gender and law. In particular, the question of power becomes clear in the works of the female thinkers discussed in terms of its weight and urgency. These Muslim female thinkers argue that Muslim jurisprudence (fiqh) is a discipline subjected to historical development, is socially constructed and embedded in various social contexts, and is not a sacred, revealed and unchanging part of religion. This means that a deconstruction and desacralisation of this jurisprudence must take place in order to take into account the enormous social changes of our time and to bring about reforms that primarily affect gender differences (cf. Mir-Hosseini et al. 2017, 3).

According to Ulrike Auga, the positions outlined here show the potential of theology as “place of resistance and subject formation” (Auga 2013, 40). In their critical view, they form counter-discourses to patriarchal interpretations of the sources that were newly formed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and deconstruct these hegemonic discourses (cf. p.40). Hence this kind of emancipatory theological knowledge and its transfer into religious education considerations is indispensable.

### 3. Empirical results

If one looks at empirical research findings on the gender issue among young Muslims in Germany, one finds that all three discourses identified by Mir-Hosseini are reflected in the attitudes and opinions of young Muslims on the subject of gender. The attitudes of the reformist discourse are most likely to be found in the partnership ideals of young girls and women. The convictions of the majority of boys and young men are most closely related to the traditionalist discourse. This difference creates a tension which, intensified by the social pressure of the environment, leads to a perception of life which most closely corresponds to the ideals of the neo-traditionalist discourse.

Comparable attitudes and positions become visible, for example, in the study conducted by Sigrid Nökel. She has examined the lifestyles of Muslim young women of the second generation in Germany, who consciously see themselves both as Muslims and as German citizens. They are characterised by their “perfect command of the German language, high educational aspirations and German school-leaving certificates, fashionably oriented yet Islamic-correct clothing, the decision for Germany as the centre of their lives and their self-affirmation as ‘German-speaking Muslim women’” (Nökel 2007, 136). Nökel describes this modern type of Muslim woman as “neo-Muslima”, a “performance variation” of a lifestyle in the “connection of religion and secularity or religion and modernity”, in the sense that these Muslim women “redefine their identity with the help of Islam and their specific interpretations of Islam – and this in contrast to a ‘traditional Islam’” (p. 136).

Although the women want to distance themselves from a traditional understanding of Islam, an ambivalence becomes clear in the gender role conceptions: The women choose their partner on the basis of the same attitude to both life and to Islam (cf. p. 148). This attitude shows that the young women try to avoid traditional role models. Therefore they are in search of the “ideal Muslim” with whom they can enter into a partnership (p. 149). The desire for a partnership-based relationship or financial independence through professional activity does not in any way mean gender equality for young women. After all, the gender difference is not in doubt, nor is the equality of men and women (cf. p. 149). Here a correspondence to the complementary understanding of gender roles becomes clear. Certainly, this understanding is distinct from the traditional housewife role, however, the “gender roles are not abolished, but are filled with new content” (p. 153).

This picture becomes even clearer when examining concepts of masculinity of boys. Birol Mertol has qualitatively examined the concepts of masculinity of boys from the second and third generation of the “Turkish migrant community”. Traditionally oriented images of masculinity “are secured and legitimized above all by physical and mental characteristics (assertiveness), by specific dress codes,



but also by religious conventions” (Mertol 2007, 182). More modern gender role patterns can be found in the area of the professional lives of their partners. Here, egalitarian views are evident among the interviewed boys (p. 184). With regard to the image of men and women in the future family, a rather traditional or neo-traditional understanding in the sense of Mir-Hosseini is evident. The man assumes the role of provider, but he is not the sole breadwinner. Traditional role allocations in housework are not preferred by most respondents and the notion of partnership tends to focus on equality, but the understanding of honor shows a strong attachment to the traditional understanding of the relationship and position between men and women. For the young men in Mertol’s study, the concept of honor is very important. This value demands from women “correct clothing, correct behaviour in dealing with unknown men, no premarital or extramarital relationships, i.e. they must maintain their virginity until marriage and be chaste during marriage” (Mertol 2007, 180). For the husband, the concept of honor depends on the behavior of his wife and the women in his family, which means that the husband must keep the behavior of his wife under control (cf. p. 180).

This study thus also shows a fluctuation between traditional and contemporary gender role patterns. Even if there are developments towards a more egalitarian understanding in the areas of housework, partnership and parenthood, the traditionally interpreted value of honor remains central for many men with a Turkish migration history, even in the second and third generations in Germany (cf. pp. 177–182).

The fact that religious beliefs, even if they are strongly culturally coloured, have an influence on gender conceptions is also confirmed in the study by Claudia Diehl and Michael König. In their secondary evaluation of the “Generations and Gender Surveys”, they investigate how religiousness affects gender-related attitudes and behavior patterns among people with a Turkish migration history of the first and second generation and among Germans (cf. Diehl and Koenig 2011, 193). They found that “first-generation Turks are less likely to agree with the principle of gender equality and also practice an egalitarian division of labor in the household much less often than Germans. Second generation Turks lie exactly between these two groups on the attitudinal level, whereas on the behavioral level they are more similar to first generation Turks and differ markedly from Germans.” (Diehl and Koenig 2011, 201) The researchers investigated the question of whether these differences can be attributed to the strength of religiosity and discovered that “being highly religious is only one of many factors – and not even a particularly relevant one – that explain the more conservative gender attitudes and traditional role patterns among Turkish immigrants. Even less religious Turks are more conservative than Germans with a similar background.” (p. 210)

The traditional or even complementary gender role behavior can be seen particularly in the analysis of the division of labor in the joint household: “Re-

ligious Turks of both generations are less inclined to egalitarian role behavior than secular Turks.” (Diehl and Koenig 2011, 208) Here traditional divisions of labor are evident in the sense that the woman takes over tasks such as cooking and washing up and the man repairs and finances (p.208). This makes it clear that gender relations correspond most closely to either traditionalist or neo-traditionalist discourse. All things considered, Diehl and König then conclude that leading a very religious life “seems to slow down the adaptation of Turkish migrants to typically post-industrial gender relations” (pp.210–211). This study clearly shows that further research is needed to examine the mutual influence of culture, religion and gender-relevant attitudes.

Hans-Georg Ziebertz, Helene Coester and Andrea Betz also identified these mutual influences. They conducted a qualitative study among Christian and Muslim girls in the 9th grade of secondary schools on the “standardisation of sexuality and autonomy” (Ziebertz et al. 2010, 222). The connections between the girls’ religiosity and their attitude towards the norm of virginity were analysed. The authors were able to show that for Muslim girls “religion or a cultural correlate of religion is a significant point of reference in the context of life” and that “they ascribe the worldly habits of their culture to Islam and often do not distinguish between religious and cultural norms and values” (p.240).

For the majority of the Muslim girls interviewed, compliance with the norm of virginity is beyond question (p.240). The agreement is based on various aspects: Conviction of the correctness of the norm, conformity to the role expectations of the environment, fear of social pressure and the loss of honor (cf. p.241). Those who suffer from social pressure express their criticism of the double standards of Muslim boys and men who, on the one hand, claim to have sexual experiences before marriage and, on the other hand, expect girls and women to enter marriage as virgins. The authors come to the following conclusion: “Most Muslim girls interpret the religious standardisation of sexuality as a social convention of their social environment”. This creates “a tension between the religious-cultural standardization of sexuality and the claim to autonomy of most of the interviewees” (p.241). Cultural and religious influences overlap strongly in the attitude towards the norm of virginity, whereby a separation is hardly possible.

According to the above-mentioned criteria, Andrea Betz and Hans-Georg Ziebertz have also examined Christian and Muslim boys in terms of how they talk about gender roles and whether these are “perceived as cultural and/or religious agreements about femininity and masculinity” (Betz and Ziebertz 2010, 258). In the case of Muslim boys, it was found that values and norms that also shape gender roles are often adopted and “conserved” from their parents (p.273). In the case of the boys, too, no direct connection between being highly religious and strong adherence to religious norms is apparent overall. It is more likely that “for interviewees who describe themselves as less religious, religion [is] a provider of norms and the basis of culture, so that they affirm traditional gender roles”

(p. 274). Betz and Ziebertz assume that the lack of religious knowledge can lead these young people to orient themselves towards tradition when it comes to the question of gender roles. Young people interested in religion, on the other hand, are more willing to critically question traditionally handed down roles (cf. p. 277).

Overall, it becomes clear that compliance with the virginity norm or the ideas about gender roles of most of the girls and boys interviewed tend to be aimed at inequality. The girls in particular say that “their virginity is negotiated quasi as a family matter, in which, for example, older brothers also get involved” (Ziebertz et al. 2010, 245). Of course, there is a dynamic. This becomes clear, for example, when relatively many girls criticise sexual double standards, even if they still adhere to their conventions. The very first “cracks and signs of erosion” also become apparent among boys: “Reflectively, most boys are aware that they should grant women an equal opportunity to shape their lives, including a professional career, but in their own value concept, models of a traditional division of roles are still present” (cf. Betz and Ziebertz 2010, 275). However, the boys are also aware that their future partners will contradict this. On the other hand, the virginity of the partner, her clothing and her interaction with other men are aspects to which particular importance is attached. These studies also show an empirical equivalent to the traditionalist and neo-traditionalist discourses presented by Mir-Hosseini.

## 4. Conclusion

In outlining the current state of research, various areas of tension with regard to gender equality become clear:

A multi-dimensional field of tension becomes apparent:

- a) between imagined/desired values and norms and lived values and norms,
- b) between theology and tradition,
- c) between the social expectations of the family environment based on a mixture of tradition and religion and the desire of young people for autonomy and self-determination,
- d) between the original milieu of the young Muslims and the local majority society,
- e) between current theological efforts for gender justice and the empirically based attitudes of young people.

Comparing the empirical findings presented here on the attitudes of Muslim youths in Germany with the three Muslim discourses on the question of gender equality outlined above, it is clearly evident that the third discourse mentioned, which fights for legal and moral equality of the sexes, has so far only arrived in a rudimentary form among Muslim youths in Germany. It is noteworthy that

female ideals and desires tend to approach reformist discourses more closely than male ones.

In Islamic theological discourses, knowledge of gender justice has emerged that has not yet found its way out of the ivory tower of academic theoretical debates. In non-academic Muslim contexts a (neo-)traditional understanding of gender difference still prevails to a large extent, which obviously also has a normative status for the majority of Muslims. Despite the predominance of this normative status, however, it also becomes clear that young people increasingly act pragmatically, situatively and contextually, juggling between norms, social expectations, expectations of expectation and their own desires.

In addition, it must be noted that the emancipatory theological knowledge about gender equality, which is mainly compiled by women scientists living in the United Kingdom and the USA, such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadood, Shaheen Serdar Ali, Leila Ahmed, has so far unfortunately only been transferred to some extent into the training of teachers in Germany. This represents a decisive challenge for Islamic religious education because the attitudes of Muslim teachers for Islamic RE in Germany are also dominated by more traditional thinking about gender differences, as for example the study by Rauf Ceylan, Veronika Zimmer and Margit Stein shows (cf. Ceylan et al. 2019).

The transfer of this emancipatory theological knowledge into Muslim RE contexts is not only a prime example of the academic relevance and urgency of international knowledge transfer, but also of its immense practical and political importance. This is because traditionalist and neo-traditionalist discourses are based on an understanding of the Quran that does not take into account the recognition of historicity. This aspect is of enormous importance not only in the gender question but also in all other problems that challenge theology.

Here the translation function of Islamic religious education becomes evident. Its task is to provide knowledge that has been theologically developed for concrete application and to translate it into pedagogical fields of action such as congregations, schools, youth groups, etc. (cf. in detail Ulfat 2019). This task of translation can overcome the ideological freezing of developments that are in flux and enable young people to analyse and reflect on the diversity of not only hegemonic discourses and their resistant counter-discourses, but also on the diversity of action practices as well as the fields of tension that they generate, and to develop themselves in working through these differences.

The emancipatory theological knowledge must be transferred internationally into Muslim religious education concepts and be included in professional and critical reflection. This offers the opportunity to redesign not only the training of teachers of Islamic RE, but also the training of community educators, and is also a further step towards making the issue of gender justice communicable beyond the German and European context, also in Arab and other Muslim contexts and discourses.

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