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Framing and Controlling Islam: The Interplay of Knowledge Production and Governmental Regulation in C.H. Becker's Scholarship

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Abstract: This article examines the role of knowledge production in shaping racialized religious difference and its entanglement with governmental interventions, focusing on C.H. Becker's contributions to Islamic Studies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Situated within the colonial-imperial context of the German Empire, C.H. Becker's work exemplifies how secular knowledge framed Islam as both a problem and a resource for governance. His framing of religious difference reveals how tolerance operated as a political technique—performing inclusion while simultaneously reinforcing control. The analysis explores the epistemological foundations of C.H. Becker's approach, demonstrating the intersection of Orientalism, secularism, and racism in producing religious difference and translating academic inquiry into political regulation. By juxtaposing the "Islamfrage" with the "Judenfrage" of the 19th century, this study reveals shared patterns in the regulation of racialized religious difference through secular frameworks, where tolerance functions as both a mechanism of inclusion and a tool of control. These processes not only defined normatively but also aligned knowledge production with national and colonial strategies, illustrating how C.H. Becker's conceptualization of *Islampolitik* is characterized by broader dynamics of liberal governance and colonial control.

Keywords: religion; race; secularism; knowledge production; religious difference; tolerance; governmental techniques



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1. Introduction

According to its persistent significance for present integration policies, Islam in Europe has evolved into a pivotal matter of political controversies and therefore—as a subject of governability—has prompted various political measures to regulate religious plurality. These are evident, for example, in initiatives aimed at the steady institutionalization of a moderate, Europeanized Islam (Haddad and Golson 2007).

Several academic works have drawn attention to the inclusive and exclusive effects of this *Islampolitik*¹, manifesting in a "dialectic of recognition and exclusion" (Amir-Moazami 2023) but also to processes of the production of Muslims as *religious* subjects (Amir-Moazami 2014, 2016; Frank 2008; Tezcan 2012) as well as processes of racialization (Modood 2005; Fernando 2014; Davidson 2012; Spielhaus 2011; Shooman 2014). Some works also emphasize the genealogical entanglements of current *Islampolitik* in imperial-colonial formations (Ahmad 2023; Keskinliç 2019) and their links to the management of religious minorities as was virulent in nation-state contexts in the 19th century (Amir-Moazami 2022).

While these works acknowledge the relationship between subjectification and techniques of power, they only hint at the central role of (scientific) knowledge production

in continually reconfiguring Islam² as a target for governmental strategies. Building on Schirin Amir-Moazami's (2018) work, I propose a more in-depth investigation into the broader landscape of knowledge production to understand its structural embedding in the political regulation of Muslims in Europe. This entails examining the disciplining and subjectifying potential of the epistemologies and methodologies at work, which enable the framing of Islam as a problem and a resource for governmental strategies.

More specifically, I address this research gap by examining the interplay of knowledge production and governmental intervention from a historical perspective. My analysis highlights the political function of modern and ostensibly *secular* knowledge production about Islam by focusing on the academic work of Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933). Tracing the epistemological conditions within his scholarship that construct religious difference, I explore how the intertwinement of secular and racial epistemologies manifests in C.H. Becker's approaches to Islam and how these are translated into governmental interventions. C.H. Becker himself framed *Islampolitik* as a political program characterized by tolerance, wherein racialized religious difference becomes not an obstacle but a resource—one that serves to manage, control, and regulate this very difference.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's discourse theory, I pay particular attention to the regimes of truth (Foucault 2020) that enabled C.H. Becker to address Islam as a problem for Europe and Germany in particular, and how these very regimes of knowledge design political programs to regulate religious difference. Doing so, I situate C.H. Becker's writings within overlapping discourses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries by examining the academic framing of Islam as a civilization alongside the colonial–imperial positioning of *Islampolitik* and its connection to the *Islamfrage*.³ This approach seeks to deepen our understanding of the intertwinement between knowledge production, the racialization of religious difference, and governmental strategies.

I argue that C. H. Becker's scholarship on Islam exemplifies broader contexts of how the race–religion nexus operates as an epistemological framework in processes of knowledge production that address religious difference. My analysis underscores the pivotal role of secular knowledge, intertwined with racial discourses, in shaping colonial and governmental policies. Consequently, I draw parallels to nation-state contexts and debates on the *Judenfrage* (Jewish Question) and discourses on Jewish difference in late 19th-century Germany. By juxtaposing “Islamfrage” and “Judenfrage”, I seek to speak to the growing body of scholarship that demonstrates how imperial–colonial and national contexts are intertwined through shared epistemological structures regulating religious difference, ultimately shaping modern secular nation-states (Gidley and Sami Everett 2022; Jansen and Meer 2020; Renton and Gidley 2017).

What unites C.H. Becker's scholarship on Islam and *Islampolitik* with discourses on racialized Jewish difference are shared epistemological structures that construct and regulate religious difference through racial and secular frameworks. These structures, central to both imperial-colonial and national governance, position Muslims and Jews as subjects of tolerance. This comparison reveals the paradoxes of tolerance as a technique of power: it performs inclusion while simultaneously reinforcing racialized religious difference as an irreconcilable condition. Recognizing these paradoxes is essential for understanding how religious difference is produced and governed in both colonial and national contexts.

Using discourse as an analytical tool means to acknowledge the relationship between knowledge and power and the role of discourses in shaping social order. My analysis therefore situates C.H. Becker's statements on Islam within broader discursive structures, acknowledging that his ideas did not arise in isolation but reflect mechanisms of power and specific regimes of truth. This approach examines how C.H. Becker's framing of

Islam as a problem emerged, the assumptions underpinning it, and its connection to Orientalism, racism, and secularism. Ultimately, it explores the subjectifying effects of power (Foucault 2005) in knowledge production through C.H. Becker's work on Islam within its historical context.

I begin by situating C.H. Becker's scholarly work on Islam within the theoretical frameworks of Orientalist discourse that emerged at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. I then analyze his scholarship as a secular form of knowledge production, emphasizing its entanglement with the racialization of religious difference. To deepen this analysis, I examine the political implications of this knowledge production by investigating how knowledge, subjectivation, and power intersect, drawing parallels between the Islamfrage and the Judenfrage of the 19th century.

2. Contextualizing C.H. Becker: Islamic Studies and the Imperial–Colonial Project

Analyzing C.H. Becker's academic work is essential for several reasons: C.H. Becker played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of Islampolitik within the colonial–imperial context of the early 20th century. By showing that research on Islamic Studies (*Islamwissenschaft*) could serve the imperial and colonial project, he underscored the entanglement of academic knowledge production with political interventions (Marchand 2009). Recognizing colonial policy as inherently Islampolitik, Becker reoriented the discipline to address political issues, institutionalizing Islamic Studies with contemporary and political relevance, directing epistemological and methodological shifts to gather useful data to support and advance the colonial project, aligning academic inquiry with the practical needs of imperial governance.

To critically contextualize C.H. Becker's reflections on Islam and Islampolitik, I focus my analysis on the institutionalization of contemporary, sociologically oriented Islamic studies, along with its methodological and theoretical foundations, within the context of the German Empire's colonial–imperial expansionist ambitions. This approach is particularly relevant given Edward Said's *Orientalism*, one of the most influential postcolonial critiques of Western knowledge production about the Orient. Said argued that German Orientalists were largely exempt from deliberate political domination (Said 2003, p. 19). This claim has been revisited and criticized as an oversimplification (Osterhammel 2001). Reactions to his argument vary widely, ranging from outright rejection (Johansen 1990) to more nuanced perspectives, such as Jenkins's (2004) argument that the answer depends on the lens applied, resulting in different conclusions. This article adopts the latter approach, suggesting that in the German context too, the Orient served as a construct through which colonial–imperial fantasies of superiority were articulated and reinforced within academic discourse.

With Mangold-Will (2004) and Marchand (2009), I contextualize C.H. Becker as a scholar deeply committed to expanding the cultural, economic, and political influence of the German Empire by advocating for the politicization of Islamic Studies, a cause he pursued with significant ambition. However, I focus less on whether his research was influenced by colonial–imperial power interests and more on examining the racializing and secularizing epistemologies and methodologies to uncover the secularizing and racializing effects of knowledge production as a discursive practice and to encourage critical reflection on them.

Between 1884 and 1914, Germany's pursuit of colonies brought Islam into sharper focus within political and public discourse (Tezcan 2012, p. 25). As Germany established itself as a colonial power in Africa and pursued imperial goals in the Near East and China, academic knowledge production became increasingly tied to colonial politics, mirroring trends in France (see Steinmetz 2023), Japan (see Heé 2012), England, and Holland⁴. A

notable example of this »scientific colonialism« (Heé 2012) is the National Colonial Congresses of 1905 and 1910, where state-sponsored, academically driven debates addressed Islam's role in the colonies (Keskinılıç 2019).

C.H. Becker himself presented the newly established "science of Islam" as meaningful by demonstrating that Islamic Studies were important for the colonial project (Becker 1910c, p. 211). In 1908, Islamic Studies found institutional support outside of university structures at the Hamburg Colonial Institute, where C.H. Becker himself was eventually appointed to chair. The Colonial Institute was to be developed into a colonial science center where in the spirit of scientific colonialism, scientific material would be collected to promote and secure all colonial and imperial endeavors (Heé 2012, p. 7; Mangold-Will 2004, p. 264).

The applied science approach of the Hamburg Colonial Institute typified scholars like C.H. Becker, who combined academic expertise with political engagement, bringing their ostensibly neutral research into public discourse. C.H. Becker exemplified this paradox, presenting himself as an advocate for objective or "value-free" research while embracing the practical implications of his work. C.H. Becker, as a scholar, maintained the image of an objective academic, even as he played a key role in shaping political processes as an advisor to government and bureaucracy (Mangold-Will 2004, p. 269ff).

This self-perception as objective becomes particularly problematic when C.H. Becker simultaneously advocated for a well-informed Islampolitik grounded in the hermeneutic products of Islamic Studies research.⁵

3. Methodological Turn: Discovering the "Essence" of Islamic Civilization

A knowledgeable and scientifically based Islampolitik requires a tailored method that can produce the necessary, application-oriented knowledge. C.H. Becker's Islamic Science promised to provide precisely this kind of knowledge, as it was able to explain the current problems of Islamicate countries and promised necessary insights into the "psyche of the Oriental" (van Ess 1980, p. 30).

Methodologically, the framing of Islam as an independent object of research was preceded by various developments in the theory of science. Scholarship on the history of Islamic studies has widely acknowledged that its institutionalization was embedded within philological and historical meta-discourses until the early 20th century (Johansen 1990; Mangold-Will 2004; Marchand 2009; Nanji 1997; Wokoek 2009). A notable element of this context was the 19th-century discussion of cultural history⁶, heavily influenced by historicism, which positioned culture as a central concept in historical research. This concept became an ideal framework for defining the Orient and, subsequently, Islam. Religions, understood as cultural entities, were consistently analyzed in terms of their essence, with this essence representing the intrinsic nature of the subject (Schulze 2010, p. 82).

In response to the growing criticism of historicism,⁷ which emerged in the 1870s, and the accompanying critique of an overly historical focus in scholarship, the emerging field of Islamic studies began to move beyond philological research. It addressed contemporary issues and sociological questions while simultaneously examining Islam as a distinct entity shaped by cultural and historical developments (Schulze 2010, p. 111).

The assumption that Islam—unlike the Christian tradition—had a lasting influence on the legal, social, political, intellectual, and cultural life of Oriental people and countries beyond the religious level became increasingly widespread among 19th century Orientalists. Islam was seen as a normative order that defined all aspects of life and, therefore, could not be categorized as a religion in the narrow sense of the term. Instead, it was qualified as a culture that also contained a significant religious component (Albert and Ghirardelli 1994; Schulze 2010).

According to C.H. Becker, Islam consists not only of (1) the religion, but also of (2) empires, (3) a political theory, and (4) a civilization as “*the cultural whole intertwining religion and state under the same name.*”⁸ (Becker 1910a, p. 1). Islam is therefore not merely a religion but a civilization which, despite all local variations and wide temporal distances, seemingly carries a unified character (Becker 1910a, p. 2) emphasizing “*that religion plays a decisive role*” (Becker 1910a, p. 3). In line with the cultural–historical questions of the time, Islam as an essence of an entire civilization religion shaped the social, societal, and political structures of Oriental countries—a circumstance that led C.H. Becker to analyze “Islam as Problem” (*Islam as a problem*) as he asserted in his inaugural essay on the establishment of Islamic studies, which carries the same title (Becker 1910a).

According to C.H. Becker, the task of Islamic studies was to “outline and assess the factors from which the religious civilization of modern Islam has grown. In addition to the religious factors, the political and economic factors, which have mostly been underestimated up to now, should be particularly recognized” and “the relationship to Hellenism and the ancient Orient should also be presented.” (Becker 1912, p. 353). This argument is particularly noteworthy because C.H. Becker sees both religious cultures, Christianity and Islam, to exhibit a high degree of analogy during the Middle Ages. He contended that Christian and Islamic civilizations developed in parallel as historically evolved cultural systems, a process he attributed to a shared cultural foundation rooted in Hellenism, as understood through the neo-humanist frameworks of his time (Becker 1907; Haridi 2005, p. 22ff).

While most German historians thus agreed that the Orient and Islam played no active role in a Europe-centered historiography, C.H. Becker integrates Islam as a comprehensive cultural system into the general Eurocentric historiography, by Orientalizing Christian cultural history and therefore making it a subject of global historical research (Haridi 2005, p. 87). The key point, however, was not merely to advocate for a cultural comparison between Christianity and Islam or to genealogically link Islam to Christianity. Rather, the goal was to demonstrate the particularity of European modernity through cultural comparison (Marchand 2009; Schulze 2010).

According to C.H. Becker, while Christianity was able to liberate itself from the “*lingering twilight of the Middle Ages*”, “*Islam could not rid itself of the worldview and way of life that had grown within it*” (Becker 1907, p. 428). Islam, he argued, had ultimately received the shared cultural heritage in a defective manner, lacked the Western principle of human self-determination, and was therefore incapable of modernization or secularization, rendering it underdeveloped (Becker 1907; Haridi 2005, p. 69).

Alexander Haridi (2005) has made a significant contribution to examining C.H. Becker’s academic work in the context of the discipline’s history by demonstrating that his paradigm of »Islamic civilization« served two functions: it aimed to systematize Islamic studies research and enforce a secular and materialistic view of Islam against philological and theological currents. Additionally, it established an internal connection between the state, political theory, culture, and religion, positioning Islamic studies as competent to comment on contemporary and, importantly, colonial and imperial issues (Haridi 2005, p. 10). According to Haridi, the paradigm of Islamic civilization also served to highlight and justify the lines of development of European modernity (Haridi 2005, p. 17). It took on a cultural–ideological function, asserting the primacy of European modernity in world history and scientifically legitimizing colonial and imperial expansion in the world (Haridi 2005, p. 10).

In cross-cultural research, where culture became a central academic category for capturing social reality, C.H. Becker positioned the Occidental world in relation to the Islamic world, framing his perspective from a modernist–secular self-image. This assumption is

confirmed by his belief that modernization was closely linked to the cultural Protestantization of Christianity, leading to the diminishing power of religion in the Occident (Becker 1907). From the beginning, the foundation of contemporary Islamic studies followed a logic that marked Islam as fundamentally different from European secularized modernity (Haridi 2005, p. 127; Schulze 2010, p. 83).

This universal–historical (*universalgeschichtlich*) and sociological approach, emphasized through a comparative method, aligns C.H. Becker with sociologist and economist Max Weber, with whom he collaborated to underscore the distinctive characteristics of a specifically Western modernity in his scholarly work.

4. Occidental Superiority as Research Agenda: C.H. Becker, Max Weber, and the Sociologization of Islam

The extent to which Max Weber influenced C.H. Becker’s research in Islamic studies, methodologically or normatively, has not yet been definitively engaged with. Various sources claim Weber’s influence (van Ess 1980, p. 44), describe it as minor (Mangold-Will 2004, p. 260), or acknowledge C.H. Becker as a source for Max Weber’s factual knowledge of Islam (Haridi 2005, p. 148; Albert and Ghirardelli 1994, p. 71; Schluchter 1987, p. 18). Dwelling on George Stauth (1993), who considers German Islamic studies and Max Weber’s comparative sociology of religion as linked in terms of methodology from their inception, this article traces the epistemological premises of both research traditions.

During their time together in the Heidelberg Circle (*Heidelberger Zirkel*), C.H. Becker and Max Weber attempted to break down barriers between different academic disciplines to create a certain “sociological interdisciplinarity” (Marchand 2009, p. 362; Müller 1991, p. 40). C.H. Becker and Max Weber were part of an academic milieu where subjects were approached from macro-historical and macro-sociological perspectives. This setting was defined by a particular conceptual vocabulary, including terms like cultural spheres and civilizations conceptualized in exchange with figures such as Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923)⁹ and Eberhard Gothein (1853–1923). Within this context, C.H. Becker drew the inspiration needed to gradually reframe the field of Islamic studies, aligning it with the rising prominence of social science research (Schulze 2010, p. 176).

For Max Weber, universal history (*universalgeschichte*) meant elaborating universal, cross-cultural typologies, which he sought to determine by examining the general relationship between religiosity and the economic constitution of a society (Haridi 2005, p. 109). Like C.H. Becker, Weber acknowledged the cultural bond of religions, which is not a mere denomination but the spirit of an entire civilization, decisively determining its historical development (Matin-Asgari 2004, p. 296). The primary interest of his sociology of religion was to reconstruct the developments that have led to the historical uniqueness of Occidental modernity, the cultural origin of which he saw in Protestantism and Calvinism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1920), Weber attempted to understand the societal and social development of a particular cultural group through its religion (Müller 1991, p. 45).

Weber’s sociological work on Islam primarily used a contrastive comparison to show that some cultural characteristics of Calvinism and Islam, which might appear similar at first glance, were not decisive factors for the development of Occidental modernity (Haridi 2005, p. 110). This is the case because Islamic civilization never, or could never, follow this path. As Salvatore (1996) aptly puts it, understanding the Islamic Orient—and particularly its essentialization according to an Orientalist model—was crucial for tracing the Occidental path to modernity (Salvatore 1996, p. 457).

Accordingly, both C.H. Becker and Max Weber used similar methodologies by attempting to define their own cultures through contrast. They sought to identify “which

concatenation of circumstances led to the emergence of certain cultural phenomena precisely on the soil of the Occident, and only here" (Weber 1920, p. 1), or, as C.H. Becker puts it, "why such a development only occurred in the Occident" (Becker 1931, p. 125). To answer this question C.H. Becker suggests the following.

"Not the parallels, not the influences—although they are also important—are as decisive as the divergences; for only they show us the real values of specifically occidental development and teach us to recognize why Europe has become Europe and the Orient has remained Orient (Becker 1909a, p. 201)".

C.H. Becker suggests emphasizing divergences over parallels or influences, highlighting a comparative framework. He sees the main divergence evidenced in the fact that "in the modern Occident, religion is losing its all-determining power" and returning "to its most actual sphere of activity, where it is naturally rooted—in the individual and in personality" (Becker 1907, p. 52). This idea also shapes Weber's analysis of Western rationality in his sociology of religion, presenting it as an internalized human precondition that defines the unique trajectory of the West (Salvatore 1997, p. 101). This divergence therefore reveals the "real values" of Western development, which implies a hierarchical evaluation under teleological premises, dichotomizing the *becoming* of Europe as a dynamic process compared to the *remaining* of the Orient.

In Weber's typology of a specifically Western rationalism, the degree of disenchantment undertaken by a religious culture and its subjects is a necessary condition of modernization. It is only the ethos of ascetic Protestantism, rooted in the Occident, that has realized this. The everyday tensions between religious duties and social reality—characteristic of other religious cultures—were broken here, making a modern lifestyle possible, which was a fundamental prerequisite for the development of certain cultural phenomena, such as rational science, rational capitalism, or modern governance (Boatcă 2016, p. 148ff).

The treatment of Islam in the works of C.H. Becker and Max Weber were thus equally pre-structured by their epistemological interest in proving a culturalist justification of Western uniqueness in world history. As the sociological view of Islam gained importance over historiographical perspectives, new questions and methods emerged, making self-conceptions and conceptions of the Other scientifically comprehensible, generating factual knowledge about a specific object of research, and producing reliable data. This expanded the Orientalist rhetoric of deficiency to include a focus on what was specifically the Self, to grasp the Occidental special path to modernity. The essentialization of the Orient was necessary to declare Occidental achievements as unique, or universally valid. (Boatcă 2016, p. 148; Salvatore 1996, p. 460ff).

5. 'Modern' Knowledge Production as *Secular Practice*

For the most part, research on C.H. Becker negotiates his work as part of Orientalist discourse. The sociologization of Islamic studies and the introduction of respective methodologies and epistemologies thus implies that this approach goes far beyond the common orientalist-cultural paradigm, as Armando Salvatore (1996) has shown. Unlike Orientalists, who questioned why the Orient remained static and incapable of modernization despite its notable history, C.H. Becker asks why the Occident alone developed in a modern and rational way, understanding modernity as a series of specifically Occident achievements. The specific, unique characteristic C.H. Becker refers to is the Christian or—to be more precise—the *Protestant* experience, and the rational way of life it enables, that marks the decisive difference between Occident and Orient.

Taking this into account, I propose to rethink the way we perceive C.H. Becker's work by conceptualizing it as a 'modern' and ostensibly secular knowledge production, a technology of power in which religion is positioned as a normalizing constant used to

distinguish between the Self and the Other, between the modern and pre-modern, or the secular and the religious. This type of research exemplifies the subjectivizing effects of power, assigning modernity and secularity to the Self while relegating pre-modernity and the religious to the Orient.

With Gil Anidjar (2006), I want to suggest that this very shift is crucial to further highlighting secularism as a discourse which is deeply ingrained in knowledge production on Islam and particularly informed by Western Christendom—also in C.H. Becker's research on Islam. For Anidjar it was Christianity—secularized in its own self-conception—that constructed a specific discourse about itself and its history, providing the foundation upon which the dichotomy between the secular and the religious could be historically established (Anidjar 2006, p. 59ff). Anidjar views secularism as a discourse that originated in the Christian tradition and as a tool for marking other cultural circles as religious in the age of colonial expansion, while Western Christianity—self-representatively—no longer qualified as religious but was reborn: “Christianity (that is to clarify this one last time, Western Christendom) judged and named itself, it reincarnated itself as secular” (Anidjar 2006, p. 60).

A consideration of the social milieu from which C.H. Becker engaged with Islam is instructive, as it highlights how secularized notions of religion have profoundly shaped academic scholarship. Under the influence of political discourses on modernity, a fundamental transformation in the conceptualization of religion was already underway, acquiring new political significance. The increasing rationalization and, above all, the privatization of religious belief granted civil society an unprecedented role, further reinforced by the growing scientification and problematization of religion.

The interpretation of sacred texts was no longer dominated by ecclesiastical authorities but was instead taken over by intellectuals emerging from an educated, property-owning bourgeois milieu. These intellectuals—“the authors of the political discourse on modernity” (Salvatore 1997, p. 23)—asserted interpretive authority by reinterpreting and historically situating these texts using the historical-critical method of religious studies. These developments not only introduced a modern form of knowledge production but also fostered a novel sense of scholarship, primarily focused on addressing *secular* problems. With the secularization of the social sphere, this form of modern knowledge production became possible, while in the Orient, religion appeared to continue governing all aspects of life (Salvatore 1997, pp. 23–39).

Those Orientalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who approached Islam as an independent field of study were rooted in this academic milieu, with approximately 80 percent having studied Protestant theology.¹⁰ The development of Islamic Studies, as established by C.H. Becker, must also be contextualized within the confessional-political debates of the late 19th century, as Becker himself originated from this Protestant-theological background. Protestant theology played a pivotal role in Orientalist scholarship by facilitating the rewriting of a Eurocentric history of religions while simultaneously offering religious legitimization for secularized sciences (Johansen 2004, p. 85).

The biographical material on C.H. Becker also shows that the Protestant national-liberal environment and the educated and middle-class milieu with which he identified were formative for his academic and political work. As a proponent of humanism (*Neuhumanismus*) as an elementary component of middle-class Protestant cultural values, C.H. Becker advocated for detachment from church authorities, rejected dogmatic ties, and showed political solidarity with the secularized nation state. In this climate, education gained new relevance, while the true educational purpose lay in the cultivation of the Self (Haridi 2005, p. 128).

For C.H. Becker, the problem of Islam was fundamentally a problem of education—something he believed Islam was incapable of achieving on its own. To modernize Islam, Becker

argued, it needed to imitate Europe and its developmental trajectory. If Islam were willing to adapt, he asserted, there was “no reason why Islam should not open itself up to education in the same way as Christianity once did” (Becker 1909b, p. 183).

In the 19th century, education was not merely a means of self-cultivation; it was integral to the very formation of German identity. It fostered “a popular identification of cultivation with a secularized Protestantism that characterized the entire educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*)” (Jarausch 1982, p. 85).

In this Protestant–academic milieu, Islam was always seen as different from its own self-interpretations. This generated a concept of Islam that understood Islam not only as a religion but also as a world, worldview, comprehensive social order, and civilization and in structural opposition to modernity (Schulze 2010, p. 202). C.H. Becker’s sociologization of Islam and its culturalizing and essentializing effect promoted modern forms of self-constitution, in which the understanding of the Other was postulated, but the self-constitutive act of recognizing the Other was concealed. In a modernizing society, it became necessary to establish new values of the Self, which were ultimately located within a normative framework (Stauth 1989, pp. 53–55).

C.H. Becker’s justification of Islamic studies with a focus on the contemporary thus implies two things: the reference to Islam as an independent object of research shows how manageable and qualifiable knowledge is generated based on universalizable data. C.H. Becker’s research in Islamic studies represents a specific research paradigm that claims to be ‘value-free’ and ‘objective,’ yet is deeply shaped by the individual perspectives and societal influences of the researcher. Here, modern knowledge production becomes a discursive, or secular practice that increasingly scientifies, politicizes, and, in a Foucauldian sense, ultimately governmentalizes the religious. The effectiveness of the secular is evident not only in its establishment of predetermined norms but also in its constraints on the questions that shape research on Islam within an imperial–colonial framework.¹¹

Also, C.H. Becker’s work on Islam exemplifies the ideologizations of Western constructions of Islam, which served to prove a unique Occidental modernity and to establish Western Christianity as a universal doctrine. The evidence for the Christian identity of this universal modernity is provided by the localization of the religious in the Orient and the secular in the Occident, as only the latter is capable of this development. The category of religion itself is used to describe the Self and the Other, to separate the Self from the Other, and to consolidate a hierarchy of this very difference. The religious becomes the Orient, “the imperial realm to be governed [,] dominated, [...] and civilized” (Anidjar 2006, p. 66) which is then contrasted with the modern “secular”, which manifests itself as transcending Protestant Christianity.

6. Nexus: Secularism, Racism, and the Racialization of Religious Difference in C.H. Becker’s Scholarship

Building on Gil Anidjar (2006) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) who both emphasize the intricate interplay between secular and racial constructions in producing religious difference, the following section examines how these dynamics manifest in C.H. Becker’s scholarship on Islam. Their works provide key analytical tools for understanding how C.H. Becker conceptualizes Islam within secularized and racialized frameworks, exemplifying the broader mechanisms of constructing religious difference as an object of knowledge.

As outlined above, conceptualizing Islam as a civilization enabled C.H. Becker to frame it as a dynamic cultural system, subject to historical development and scientific analysis. His construction of Islamic civilization was central to asserting the uniqueness of European modernity. However, his argument on *why* Islam failed to follow the same

developmental trajectory as the Occident or Western Christianity is key to understanding the intersection of racial and secular epistemologies in his scholarship.

The scholarship on C.H. Becker highlights that his depiction of Islam, though dynamic, was grounded in an essentialist preconception of the Orient. While Islam as a cultural system was portrayed as adaptable and multifaceted, the Muslim, characterized as an ‘Oriental’, was consistently described as lethargic, underdeveloped, and devoid of freedom. Furthermore, this scholarship emphasizes that Becker attributed a pivotal role to cultural actors, namely Muslims or Orientals, in determining how civilizations—whether Christianity or Islam—progress toward a modernized self (Haridi 2005, p. 40; Schulze 2010, p. 159).

This means that C.H. Becker attributes to the Orient an agency characterized by a racialized notion of deficiency. This is evident in the predominantly negative traits assigned to the Orient, which underscore its totalizing nature. This perceived deficient agency, C.H. Becker argued, is also the reason Islam failed to undertake the developmental steps achieved by modern Europe. As a result, Becker posited that while the Orient engaged with the shared cultural heritage of Christianity and Islam—Hellenism—in rigid continuity, the Occident approached it creatively, through rupture and innovation. According to Becker, the historical significance lies in the creative energy of the cultural actors, which highlights the diverse outcomes of this shared heritage (Haridi 2005, p. 43ff).

C.H. Becker concludes that “[religion] [...] is, after all, merely a consequence of the inherent natural disposition of its cultural actors” (Becker 1909b, p. 183), or that “culture arises from the inherent nature of a people.” (Becker 1919, p. 47). Accordingly, this racialized agency of the cultural actors determines the formation of religious civilizations: “The variety of religion is the natural expression of the natural variety of races” (Becker 1910b, p. 219). Thus, the mere religion of Islam was not to be held responsible for the “lamentable state of most Islamic countries” (Becker 1909b, p. 183). The decisive factor lies “in the peoples, the races, and not the religion. The European peoples have freed themselves from the oriental fetters of medieval Christianity—so closely related to Islam—through their own strength and have thereby forged modern Europe, both spiritually and materially. The peoples of the Orient, however, have [never] possessed this power[...].” (ibid.).

Islam, therefore, illustrates that the Orient, due to the racially deficient agency of Orientals, was unable to either integrate or transcend the Hellenistic heritage in the same manner as the Occident. As C.H. Becker argues, “[t]he great decisive experience of the Occident is precisely humanism” (Becker 1922, p. 27ff), which signified that “the rule of religion over the whole of life, over all its manifestations [and] over the individual” came to an end in the modern age (Becker 1907, p. 405). Becker further asserts, “antiquity not only lives on in the Occident as it does in Islam, no, it is reborn there. And with it, man, who is fundamentally different from the Oriental, is born”. The fundamental factor here was “the prior internal rupture with antiquity brought about by Christianity,” which was then re-experienced “not by an intellect alien to the race, but by one of kindred blood” (ibid.). Although C.H. Becker sees Hellenism as a common and shared cultural heritage of the Occident and Orient, he emphasizes the defective processing of this heritage, attributed to the racially inferior agency of the Oriental.

This perspective aligns with Masuzawa’s argument in *The Invention of World Religions*. Masuzawa argues that the modern concept of religions emerged as a product of Western knowledge production. She sees the discourse on world religions in 19th centuries comparative religious studies less “a turn away from Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic conception of the world, towards a more egalitarian and lateral delineation” (Masuzawa 2005, p. 13) but rather a hegemonic process of self-assurance to prove the superiority of European Christianity through classifications. She shows how the scientific discourse formation of ‘world religions’ has been guided from the beginning by a specific paradigm based on a monolithic,

universalistic, and teleological understanding of history that can only be realized by people of European descent. Supported by the universal–historical narrative, only Christians could transcend pre-modern shortcomings, while Islam, as a rigid and totalizing system, prevented this very transcendence (Masuzawa 2005, p. 197).

Masuzawa emphasizes that comparative philology, for example, went beyond the analysis of languages and created new possibilities for constructing European roots that were believed to be found in Hellenism (Masuzawa 2005, p. xii). Particularly, the division of language families into “Indo-European” and “Semitic” show that these classification systems always had a secularizing and racializing effect. This led to the separation of Christianity and the Semites and located Christianity in a Hellenistic and Aryan tradition, while Islam was increasingly Semitized. “Islam came to stand as the epitome of the racially and ethnically determined, nonuniversal religion” (Masuzawa 2005, p. xiii), determined and constrained by national, ethnic, and racial particularities of the ‘Arabs’ whereas Christianity could achieve universality and transcendence (ibid.).

Masuzawa highlights how philological classifications of language families, tied to racialized notions of difference, shaped the hierarchy of world religions and influenced comparative religious studies. The division between ‘Indo-European’ and ‘Semitic’ languages posed a challenge to Christianity’s scholarly assertion of superiority, as its origins in Judaism linked it to Semitism. Philologists resolved this by framing Semitic languages as grammatically deficient, attributing this to the racial capabilities of their speakers. This allowed Christianity to be separated from Judaism and re-situated within antiquity, specifically Hellenism, as its true origin (Masuzawa 2005, p. 81).

Just as Masuzawa illustrates how the perceived imperfection of Semitic languages in philology was attributed to the supposed racial deficiencies of their speakers, C.H. Becker portrays the Oriental as incapable of integrating humanistic values due to his racially determined nature. This perceived incapacity was framed as a necessary precondition for Europe’s emergence as modern. Consequently, religious difference becomes the antithesis of the secular European, who embodies the principles of Western modernity.

Masuzawa takes her argument further by asserting that the devaluation of the Semitic in contrast to the Aryan reveals a new logic and momentum within the knowledge production on Islam, where anti-Semitism against Jews found a new expression:

In short, this scientifically based anti-Semitism facilitated a new expression of Europe’s age-old animosity toward the Islamic powers, insofar as this science categorized Jews and Arabs as being »of the same stock«, conjointly epitomizing the character of the Semitic »race«. (Masuzawa 2005, p. 26)

In *The Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, Anidjar (2008) follows a similar argument by describing the Semite as the result of a certain discursive moment in history, manifesting itself in the fact that “whatever was said about the Jews could equally be said about the Arab and vice versa” (Anidjar 2008, p. 18). According to Anidjar, race and religion are mutually obscuring and ordering configurations that affirm European–Christian and secular identity, both categories of colonial knowledge production and a tool of colonial rule (Anidjar 2008, p. 27).

Anidjar also situates this discursive incitement regarding the Semites in the 19th century, a period when interest in philological and religious studies at European universities rose exponentially—precisely during the time when Europe began identifying itself as secular (Anidjar 2008, p. 20). Hence, Anidjar concludes: “[S]ecularism is Orientalism. Race is Religion. The evidence lies in the Semites” (Anidjar 2008, p. 21).

Masuzawa and Anidjar both underscore the discursive kinship between racial and secular interpretative frameworks within the Orientalist scholarly tradition. While both scholars critique secularism as part of Western modernity’s hegemonic project, Masuzawa

centers her argument on the intellectual construction of religions, whereas Anidjar focuses on secularism as a racialized discourse, presenting it as a mechanism of exclusion and domination over non-Christianity identities. Both approaches are relevant for my analysis because they acknowledge that the categories of race and religion are mutually constitutive within the framework of secular knowledge production. Anidjar even further highlights their subjectifying and disciplining potential.

The racialization of religious difference and the associated intertwining of secular and racist interpretative frameworks is initially evident in C.H. Becker's research. In his view, Islam, as a normative order embedded in all areas of life, "*penetrates all spheres of existence*" (Becker 1905, p. 310). Unlike secularized Christianity, Islam now represents the religious, with its flawed historical development attributed to the racial inferiority of its cultural actors.

The Oriental is thus attributed a fixed essence inscribed in the body, a defining characteristic that ostensibly reveals the soul and mentality of all individuals grouped under the collective terms of Islam and the Orient. In C.H. Becker's universal-historical framework, race and religion function as interlinked markers of difference, shaping historical narratives and reinforcing secularized Europe's self-conception as modern. Religion is normatively tied to a teleological narrative of secularization; race is tied to a narrative of capability while being intertwined with each other inextricably. This framework casts the degeneration of Islam as not merely cultural or religious but inherently racial, evidencing the intertwining of secularization and racialization in producing religious *difference*. This racialization constructs an Islamic milieu that, due to its deviations and perceived threats to the colonial project, becomes the focus of political regulation.

So far, my analysis has shown how secular and racial epistemologies co-articulate within knowledge production, producing religious difference. C.H. Becker's framing of Islam and Islampolitik exemplifies broader discursive frameworks by secularizing, racializing, and essentializing Islam as a totalizing, non-modern system. To illuminate the broader scope of these logics, my analysis reflects on the parallels between C.H. Becker's Islampolitik and the construction of Jewish difference in the context of 19th century Jewish emancipation.

7. Contextualizing the Production of Religious Difference and Its Regulation

At first glance, one might assume that a comparison between Islamfrage and Judenfrage is redundant, given that the Judenfrage emerged in the early 19th century as a national debate centered on citizenship and emancipation, whereas the Islamfrage was negotiated in the early 20th century within a colonial-imperial framework. However, I purpose that such a comparison indeed proves to be meaningful, as it reveals on an epistemological level that both discourses mobilize secular and racial epistemologies to assert the superiority of Western (Christian) modernity, positioning both Muslims and Jews as antithetical to its ideals and as subjects to be normalized.

The »Semitic Hypothesis« formulated by Anidjar serves as a central point of reference, as both Jews and Muslims constitute both religion and race in a secular world (Jansen and Meer 2020). The analogy between the Judenfrage and Islamfrage arises from the epistemological conditions that structured their scientific and political problematization, revealing the correlation between national and colonial-imperial contexts in the production and regulation of religious difference. Edward Said, in *Orientalism* (Said 2003), similarly observed that studying the formation of Orientalist discourse and its religious-racist implications led him, "*by an almost inescapable logic,*" to trace "*the history of a strange 'secret' sharer of Western anti-Semitism*" (Said 2003, p. 27).

8. The Jewish Question: Assimilation, Acculturation, and the “Degeneration” of the Jew in the 19th Century

As a product of the Enlightenment and the resulting pursuit of universal freedom and equality, the social outsider position of Jews increasingly lost legitimacy, necessitating a liberalization of existing restrictions against Jews. The emancipation of the Jews was not a linear process, but rather a lengthy, variable, and often contradictory process of holistic transformation and subsequent assimilation into an imagined Christian–German society (Erb and Bergmann 1989, p. 15ff; Sorkin 1987). Christian Wilhelm von Dohm’s essay *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (Dohm 1781) provided an ideological basis for the official policies of European governments towards Jews. Jewish emancipation is discussed as a problem whose solution could enhance the general welfare of the state (Bar-Chen 2005, p. 13ff).

In his memorandum, C.W. von Dohm explored the extent to which Jews as a Jew could be upgraded morally and politically (Sorkin 1987, p. 24). He proposed a series of restructuring and educational measures as core criteria for the emancipation of Asian Jews (Bar-Chen 2005, p. 13). Educated circles, seeing themselves as modern, translated the once religiously influenced, theological inferiority of Jews into secular language, now referring to their moral degeneration. Jews were seen as potentially human, regenerable through education and thus capable of becoming citizens. The Jewish Question was therefore an “educational problem” to be solved by state regulatory measures (Sorkin 1987, pp. 20–25).

Bruno Bauer’s pamphlet *Die Judenfrage* (Bauer 1843) provides a first indication of the educational–paternalistic impetus in demands for Jewish Emancipation and the effectiveness of secularism in this process. Like C.W. von Dohm, Bruno Bauer argued that the inner state of Jewry had to change before discussing the legal and social equality of Jews. He questioned whether Jews could be emancipated as Jews at all, responding with an unequivocal no:

“Whosoever seeks to emancipate the Jew as a Jew labors in vain, as futile as the attempt to wash the M*** white. In truth, he deceives himself in this vain effort; for while he imagines he cleanses the M*** with soap, he merely scrubs with a dry sponge, leaving him untouched.” (ibid., p. 176)

Bauer equated emancipation with the liberation of man, requiring the elimination of any connection between political status and religious faith. He called for both Jews and Christians to renounce their religious peculiarities to fully embrace the humanist ideal of freedom (Dietze 2012, p. 35). The emancipation of the Jew thus required emancipation from Judaism, which could only succeed if Christianity itself moved towards a modern secular state. Judaism had to undergo enlightenment and secularization to adapt to a different value system, manifesting in a Christian–Western and secular leading culture (ibid., p. 35ff). The Jew, rooted in outdated traditions, functioned as an antithesis to emerging norms of freedom, inherent in Christianity and ennobled secularization.

9. From Faith to Ontoi: Effects of the Discursive Construction of Jewishness on the Politicization of the Jewish Question

The emancipation of Jews was not merely aimed at liberalizing existing political and social restrictions against Jews. Patchen Markell (2009) in *Bound to Recognition*, points out that the laws “lifted restrictions on Jewish life, but it also served as a tool through which the state could mold its Jewish population into shape consistent with the requirements of modern government—by which, that is, it could perform the work of identifying Jews as citizens and identifying itself as sovereign” (ibid., p. 133). Recognition therefore requires a clearly designed subject to be recognized, often imagined, and constructed through the act of recognition itself.

In *Regulating Aversion—Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*, Wendy Brown (2006) sees the Jewish Question in France in the 19th century as a question of the denationalization and de-corporation of the Jew, leading to their incorporation as citizens into a nation-state. This inclusive process, which she conceptualizes as a politics of tolerance, shows the extent to which discursive constructions of Jewishness shaped the political regulation of the Jewish Question. Using discourses of tolerance, Brown traces how the Jewish faith transformed into a racialized group identity (*ibid.*, p. 50).

The assimilation of Jews entailed their Protestantization. Integrating Jews into the nation required transforming and normalizing them—even if they were always to remain Jews. Brown describes this process as the “[...] triple forces of recognition, remaking, and marking—of emancipation, assimilation and subjection; of identification as different [...],” forming the regime of tolerance that governed and administered Jewish Emancipation. Assimilation aimed to make Jews more modern, European, and free, confirming them to the norm to make them good citizens (*ibid.*, pp. 51–57).

Brown demonstrates that the racialization of Jewish difference produced a new subject of tolerance in a Christian cultural tradition that was imbued with a certain kind of Jewishness based less on religious belief or national descent than on physiological, intellectual, and emotional constitution. Otherness was inscribed in the body as an embodied identity that was immutable by nature. The racialization of Jewish difference was part of a larger processes of the production of embodied difference, which “*was understood to saturate the respective body, mind, and soul of Jews [...]—that is, to exhaustively define their respective identities, subjectivities, and potential public personae.*” (*ibid.*, p. 61). Race “*was inscribed in every element of the body and soul*” and persisted even when Jews assimilated and thus adapted to a canon of values regarded as universal” (*ibid.*, 54).

The racialization of the Jewish difference within the discourse of tolerance was not designed to homogenize or abolish but rather to support the affirmation of identity or state sovereignty through an institutionalization of difference. This policy of tolerance is a discursive practice that provides information about the subjectivity of Jewishness as a group-related identity by reinforcing totalizing characteristics of subject and identity formation. At the same time, these policies reinforce the appearance that the tolerating entity—the state or a non-labeled identity—is neutral, modern, or secular (Brown 2000, p. 275). For “[t]hat which was tolerated affirmed the naturalness, power and authority of those who practiced tolerance” (*ibid.*, p. 262).

Tolerance as a discursive practice produces, organizes, and marks subjects—it determines where the boundaries of the tolerable lie. Tolerance is not an innocent norm of liberal virtue that accepts or even welcomes difference, but, in Foucault’s sense, a specific kind of pastoral technology of power that fulfills specific functions. Tolerance discourses “*designates certain beliefs and practices as civilized and others as barbaric, both at home and abroad; it operates from a conceit of neutrality that is actually thick with bourgeois Protestant norms*” (Brown 2006, p. 7). Tolerance becomes crucial “*when a group difference that poses a challenge to the definition of binding features of the whole must be incorporated but must also be sustained as a difference: regulated, managed, controlled*” (*ibid.*, p. 71). Tolerance itself becomes an administrative mechanism producing disruptive difference.

In this process, the theory of Judaism as a race is perpetuated both in public and scientific discourses, “*ranging from anthropological and biological to philological and literary,*” (*ibid.*, p. 55), as well as cultural, historical, and theological disciplines, eventually permeating political debates surrounding the Jewish Question. “*All of these built on the nineteenth-century zeal, both scholarly and popular, for typology, classification, and measurement and drew for evidence on everything from brain size and survival capacity to the origins of languages and language groups*” (*ibid.*, p. 55).

Scholars such as Diane Segroves (2012)¹² and James Pasto (1998)¹³ have highlighted the connection between knowledge production and processes of racializing Jewish differences. Despite their often unscientific and unsystematic nature, these theories shared a unifying characteristic, as noted by Brown: they provided both liberals and antisemites alike with a means to conceptualize the idea of ‘Jewishness’ independently of faith or religious practice, hence a secularized interpretation. As Brown observes, “*treating Jewishness as a racial formation enabled Jewish belief and the Jewish nation to fade while the Jew lived*” (Brown 2006, p. 55). Through this transformation, Jewishness was reconfigured into a political resource instrumental in the governance and regulation of difference itself.

Thus, tolerance discourses do not sanction difference but outline a politics of tolerance as a moral–political technology with broad effects beyond conflict resolution or minority protection. Instead, tolerance discourses present themselves as biopolitical mechanisms of discipline that seek to adapt what was previously marked as inferior, marginal, and degenerate to a certain dominant culture through normalization. The underlying paradox is that the racialization of Jewish difference operating here implies that the alienation of the Jew remains a theoretical utopia (ibid., p. 55).

10. Islamfrage: C.H. Becker’s *Islampolitik* as a Politics of Tolerance

These logics of tolerance discourses outlined by Wendy Brown find a striking parallel in C.H. Becker’s *Islampolitik*¹⁴, where Islam is similarly racialized and positioned as incompatible with secular modernity unless transformed. C.H. Becker’s work exemplifies how these frameworks operate within the connection between knowledge production and governmental techniques also within colonial governance promoted by him.

C.H. Becker considered Islamic studies as a crucial tool for asserting the political interests of the German Empire in its colonial territories, inhabited by a large Muslim population. This is why “*in significant parts of the German protectorates, nearly every measure must be evaluated based on its impact on Islam.*” (Becker 1910c, p. 211). “*The existence of the Islamic Question necessitates a deliberate Islampolitik on the part of the administration*” (Becker 1910c, p. 211), which is why “*all officials in German East Africa, Cameroon and Togo must have a thorough knowledge of Islam*” (Becker 1909b, p. 186). “*Since Islam’s view of life penetrates into all spheres of existence, a confrontation with it is unavoidable, especially for the modern state, and indeed for the Oriental as well as the European*” (Becker 1905, p. 310).

C.H. Becker was not uncritical of colonialism, but he justified the civilization of the colonized peoples and efforts of European expansion as the moral obligation of white, colonial leaders who were “*predestined to be guardians and educators of the lower races*” (ibid., p. 310). C.H. Becker saw this mission partially risked by possible Christian missionary work, suggesting that Islamization could achieve the goals of civilization more effectively, especially in Africa, as Islam fosters “*a spirit of discipline, an inner stability and an outward good behavior and thus the precursors of a higher civilization in a much more extensive and profound way than the mission will ever be able to*” (Becker 1910b, p. 201).

C.H. Becker’s hierarchical ranking of civilizations placed Islam as inferior to Christianity but superior to African traditions (ibid., p. 205). To prevent unwanted emancipation efforts that would follow Christianization, C.H. Becker proposed an Islamization of the colonized population. “*From a religious point of view, this alienation created by Islam may certainly appear regrettable, but it makes it much easier to maintain the authority of the Europeans*” (ibid., p. 200ff). According to C.H. Becker, “*the educational value of Islam, which turns the N**** into a human being*” (ibid., p. 201) is clear and formulates a thesis that at first glance seems surprising: “*Our attitude towards Islam is filled with tolerance; for its usefulness [for the colonial project] is indisputable*” (Becker 1910b, p. 205ff).

The Islamization of the colonial population was seen as tolerable insofar as it imparted a moral law, provided it aligned with a Europeanized version of Islam. This entailed transforming a milieu perceived as deficient. Consequently, a culturally capable Islam, in Becker's view, could only arise through European education, which would reduce religion to its social component and separate it from politics. The Europeanization of Islam, therefore, sought to reshape the habits and sensibilities of Muslim subjects and colonial citizens according to C.H. Becker's liberal–secular principles, thereby producing usable citizens for the colonial project (Tezcan 2012, pp. 24–31).

C.H. Becker's promotion of humanist ideals framed his problematization of Islam within a paternalistic–educational rationale that also provided its solution. This solution underscores the interplay between secularism and the normalization of a perceived deficient Muslim milieu. For Becker, the core issue of Islam was educational—a problem that Islam was incapable of resolving independently. Only through modernization, secularization, and Europeanization could the perceived deficiencies of Islamic civilization and its cultural actors be addressed. Islam was included in the colonial project to reinforce the power of the colonial state, portrayed as problematic yet potentially adaptable and subject to normalization. The paternalistic gesture of liberal tolerance inherent in this framework not only acknowledged difference but also reinforced the authority of those defining the normative boundaries of tolerance, thereby consolidating imperial–colonial power.

Conceptualizing C.H. Becker's *Islampolitik* as a governmental technique of tolerance, as outlined by Wendy Brown for Jewish Emancipation, means to incorporate Islam, when identified as a problem, to secure colonial rule. It also operates on a scholarly level by producing “*identities as sites of identitarian truth*” (Brown 2000, p. 389), marking them as deficient, and subsequently tying this deficiency to a normative project aimed at regulating and managing it on a political level. The scholarly racialization of religious difference affirmed the colonial subject's identification as a problem, profoundly shaping the subsequent strategic negotiation of their regulation.

The inscription of a racial–religious identity in the bodies of the colonized occurs through knowledge of certain practices and beliefs that are understood as necessary components of subject types. The racialized identity *Muslim* then describes a mentality or soul to be transformed and regulated, normalized as an Islamic milieu through cultivation and European education—not by restrictive sanctions but “*through positive measures and permissive forbearance*,” (Becker 1905, p. 310) because “*according to the generally recognized law of religious tolerance, no modern state will lend its hand to combating Islam, though it may occasionally need to intervene against excesses and distortions*” (ibid., p. 318). Thus, “*every European power with Mohammedan subjects, whether in its domestic or colonial policy, holds an interest in wholly incorporating its Mohammedans into the state*” (ibid., p. 318).

According to Levent Tezcan (2012), it is striking how the concept of a secularized Islam was envisioned as a means of maintaining order, as “[*h*]ere the concern for cultural value, i.e., the correction of the soul in the sense of creating the modern subject, on the one hand, and the politics of interests in the sense of peace and order converge—and in a much more subtle way than Edward Said could have imagined”. The mechanisms of discipline and normalization embedded in *Islampolitik* were not solely repressive but instead relied on the productive dimensions of power, rendering it a form of governmental power (ibid., p. 31).

In C.H. Becker's *Islampolitik*, religion and race function as a strategic tool for the exercise of power, contributing to the formation of a more productive society and legitimizing the sovereignty of the state in its colonial territories. This dynamic, overlooked in Foucault's conception of governmentality, has been highlighted by Wendy Brown and Patchen Markell in their analyses of Jewish Emancipation in 19th century Europe.

Like the Jewish Question, which demonstrates how racial and secular epistemologies intersect to construct and manage religious difference, C.H. Becker's *Islampolitik* employs a similar framework. His conceptualizations racialized and essentialized Islam as a totalizing cultural system mirrors the ways Jewish difference was constructed and problematized within 19th century secular-liberal discourse. Both cases underscore how secular knowledge production serves to delineate acceptable forms of religion while problematizing those deemed incompatible with the modern state. In this way, C.H. Becker's *Islampolitik* reflects the same logic of exclusion and control that underpinned the Jewish Question.

11. Conclusions

What do these findings reveal about the relationship between religion, race, and knowledge production? Building on the scholarly work of C.H. Becker, my analysis demonstrates that his framing of Islam through secular and racialized epistemologies exemplifies broader processes of constructing and regulating religious difference. Within secular frameworks, religion is problematized based on its perceived deviation from secularized Western Christendom, leading to its regulation, management, and control. Both the Islamfrage and Judenfrage are embedded within a normalizing project in which knowledge production serves to establish normative distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion. This constructed knowledge, presented as objective truth, itself functions as a form of political intervention.

By juxtaposing the Islamfrage and Judenfrage, my analysis reveals shared strategies for negotiating religious difference. These strategies highlight how secular knowledge production and political governance intertwine to regulate racialized religious difference. The regulation of religious difference under racial-secular frameworks operate through an educational-political rationale rooted in the humanistic worldview of enlightened liberalism. This rationale aims to align and manage difference productively rather than outright reject it. However, the political impetus of tolerance obscures mechanisms of inclusion and control that remain embedded within secular frameworks and political interventions.

Both cases thus expose the intrinsic link between liberalism, colonialism, and the racially coded logic of secular knowledge. These connections shape the production of knowledge on racialized religious difference and inform the negotiation of both the Islamfrage and Judenfrage. My analysis underscores the discursive interplay between national and colonial-imperial contexts in constructing and regulating religious difference.

C.H. Becker's work on Islam and *Islampolitik* exemplifies how the race-religion nexus operates within knowledge production and how these epistemologies are translated into political interventions. His framing of tolerance as a tool for managing religious difference highlights broader mechanisms within secular and racialized epistemologies aimed at regulating the religious Other.

Future research should critically explore the extent to which these historical genealogies of knowledge production on Islam and their entanglements with colonial, imperial, and hegemonic frameworks persist in current research projects. Such investigations should systematically trace the nexus between knowledge and power by analyzing the regimes of truth that inform contemporary secular knowledge production on Islam and its entanglement with political governance.

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Notes

- 1 The term “Islampolitik” encompasses a wide array of measures, programs, debates, and initiatives. These range from prevention programs aimed at countering Islamism to legal, political, and civil society efforts to recognize Islam as a public-law cooperation (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen rechts*), among other activities (Amir-Moazami 2023). To underscore the distinctiveness of this phenomenon within the German context, the German term “Islampolitik” is used throughout this article. In translation, “Islampolitik” means “Islam-related Policies”.
- 2 In the following, terms such as Islam, Orient, Muslim, Oriental, Jew, West, and religion are understood as discursive constructions. Normally, these terms would be placed in quotation marks to highlight their constructed nature and political significance. However, for readability, this will mostly be omitted or indicated only upon first mention.
- 3 In recent scholarship, the term “Muslim Question” (Amir-Moazami 2022; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020; Norton 2013; Sayyid 2009) is more commonly employed to analyze the often-one-sided problematization of Islam and Muslims in the Global North, particularly as a means of reconfiguring the liberal-democratic contours of Western democracies. This article, however, adopts the term “Islamfrage,” literally translated as “question of Islam,” to align with the terminology used during C.H. Becker’s time.
- 4 Christian Snouck Hurgronje is a pivotal figure in the Dutch context for his role in linking science and colonial policy. His work exemplifies how academic knowledge production was interwoven with the colonial ambitions of the Netherlands. Notably, Snouck Hurgronje maintained regular scholarly exchanges with C.H. Becker. For further details, see (Mangold-Will 2004, p. 259).
- 5 For completeness, it is worth noting that most Orientalists at German universities firmly opposed “purpose-driven” research and actively avoided engaging with contemporary issues. Unsurprisingly, the “traditionally” oriented Orientalists, committed to the ideal of disinterested scholarship, were hesitant to take C.H. Becker’s work in Islamic Studies seriously. See (Mangold-Will 2004, pp. 269–72)
- 6 For the shift in Islamic Studies toward cultural history, see Joseph van Ess (1980). C.H. Becker drew the necessary inspiration for this from his colleagues Ignaz Goldziher and the Dutch colonial official Christian Snouck Hurgronje, who were among the first to recognize not only the possibility but the necessity of conceptualizing large, linguistically diverse cultural spheres as culturally historical units of significant scholarly importance. See (Mangold-Will 2004, p. 259).
- 7 For a discussion of the relationship between Orientalism and historicism, see (Schäbler 2008).
- 8 Throughout the article, translations from the original German source into English have been made by the author.
- 9 Ernst Troeltsch developed the category of the Cultural Circle (*Kulturkreis*) into a scholarly concept enabling Eurocentric universal history, a framework C.H. Becker acknowledged drawing upon. See (Becker 1910a, p. 4; 1922, p. 24). While Becker integrated Islam into “world history” as part of a shared history, Troeltsch categorically excluded Islam from European universal history. Baber Johansen attributes the authority of this “historical Orientalism” to Troeltsch, arguing that Becker merely adopted his concept, making cultural essentialization the fault of historical scholarship rather than Islamic Studies. See (Johansen 2004, pp. 86–87). Schäbler (2008), however, critiques Johansen’s argument as an “exculpation” of his field, asserting that both Orientalism and historicism enable orientalist historiography that reinforces the uniqueness of Western modernity.
- 10 For the influence of biblical criticism and its historical-critical method on Islamic Studies and Orientalism, see (Johansen 2004, p. 72ff).
- 11 This perspective aligns with Agrama’s (2012) conception of secularism as a “problem-space” that perpetually generates debates over the boundaries of religion in society. He proposes analyzing the questioning power of secularism, as the “problem-space” it engenders remains inherently unsettled, with its norms and principles continually subject to negotiation, contestation, and redefinition.
- 12 Diane Segroves, explores how Wilhelm Bousset’s historical-religious scholarship absorbed and reinforced scientific constructions of “race” and “religion”. She highlights the pivotal role of “Bildung” (education) and the Protestant, bourgeois milieu from which Bousset wrote about Judaism. Segroves also examines the relationship between Western colonialism and the establishment of religious studies as an academic discipline, showing how these intertwined factors shaped constructions of Jewishness.
- 13 James Pasto analyzes the interplay of knowledge and power in shaping Jewish studies within 19th-century Germany, under the influence of Orientalist discourse on religion. He argues that, like contemporary Islamic studies, Jewish studies of the time were less concerned with straightforward historical inquiry and more focused on examining Christianity’s distinct development and Protestantization. By reconceptualizing their own religious tradition through Enlightenment-era philosophical and historiograph-

ical paradigms, these studies used Judaism as a lens to explore Christianity's origins and modernization. Pasto contends that these scholarly efforts significantly shaped the politicization of the Jewish Question.

¹⁴ To date, there has been limited knowledge about the actual implementation of C.H. Becker's Islampolitik.

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