Preface

With pleasure, modest pride and in my quality as chairman of the board of the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS), I present to you this volume *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Transformations and Continuities*. It contains a selection of articles written by scholars who were invited to talk about their work at the seasonal schools that were organised by NISIS in the past years. In the introduction to this selection of articles Léon Buskens, academic director of NISIS, will explain how this volume came about. Let me say a few words about NISIS and the scholarly field it covers.

NISIS is a research school, founded in 2010, in which nine Dutch universities participate. The aim of the school is to address Islam in a broad thematic and interdisciplinary way. This broad approach has certainly contributed to the success of NISIS. Through the organisation of seasonal schools every six months and network days where ongoing research is presented, we have created an academic community of researchers working on Islam at Dutch universities. But we have also built up and extended an international academic network of scholars, and we work together closely with several research institutes in and outside Europe. The contributions to this volume are the fruits of this endeavour.

NISIS considers interdisciplinarity and thematic focus not just a hollow mantra to please the academic community, funding agencies, and policymakers. Islam is more than a religion in the strict theological sense. If we confine ourselves to doctrinal normativity and Islamic law to analyse what Muslims motivate and how they build religious landscapes and lifeworlds, we seriously narrow down our understanding of Islam. Conversely, if we consider the rich body of theological work that has been written over centuries, the normative frameworks that guide people, and the canonised practices to which Muslims refer as irrelevant, we also seriously limit analytical rigor.

This may sound as a truism, but in an academic landscape that is still largely dominated by disciplinary boundaries, interests, and money flows it is vital to show that only a broad approach to the study of Islam can overcome disciplinary myopia. In addition, we have organised our schools around specific themes that bear relevance to social issues and put the study of Islam in a wider perspective. We have invited renowned scholars from all over the world to give keynote lectures and discuss the work of young scholars. Through the strict interdisciplinary and thematic format
of the schools we want young scholars, who are typically trained in a single
discipline, to engage with other scholarly approaches and to reflect on their
own work. The thematic approach encourages them to “think outside the
box” of their own research topic.

NISIS started in 2010 with the generous funding of the Dutch Ministry of
Education, Culture and Science, and of course with the active involvement
of the nine participating universities. The recent academic audit of the
first five years was excellent. It gave us the energy to continue our work.
Hopefully, we will be able to make this volume the start of a series in the
years to come.

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