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Persistent Patterns

Moyaert, the Moriscos and Muslims in Europe

Zusammenfassung

In ihrem jüngsten Buch weist Marianne Moyaert auf historische Muster in Bezug auf die Etablierung christlicher Normativität hin. Dieser Artikel greift Moyaerts Konzept der ›religionization‹ auf und wendet es an, um europäische Spannungsfelder mit Islam und Muslimen zu untersuchen. Der Artikel stellt Vergleiche zwischen den historischen Erfahrungen des frühneuzeitlichen Spaniens und der Moriscos (zwangsgetaufte muslimische Gemeinschaften) und heutigen muslimischen Gemeinschaften in Europa an. Dabei greift er Moyaerts Idee von Mustern der ›reliigonization‹ auf, indem er zeigt, welche Methoden, Diskurse und politischen Vorgehensweisen eines ›religiösen Othering‹ in heutigen europäischen Diskussionen über den Islam und Muslime häufig fortbestehen. Das Bestehen dieser Muster stellt eine Herausforderung für liberales Denken und liberale Politik dar und erfordert eine solidere Theoretisierung/Anwendung von Konzepten der ›Toleranz‹.

Summary

In her most recent book, Marianne Moyaert points to historical patterns in the establishment of Christian normativity. This article engages with and applies Moyaert's frame of religionization to explore European tensions with Islam and Muslims. The article highlights comparisons between the historical experiences of early modern Spain and the Moriscos (forcibly baptized Muslim communities) and contemporary Muslim communities in Europe. In so doing, it engages Moyaert's idea of patterns of religionization by demonstrating the consistent methods, discourses and policies of ›religious othering‹ that often persist in contemporary European discussions of Islam and Muslims. The presence of these patterns poses a challenge to liberal thought and policies and demands a more robust theorization/application of notions of ›tolerance‹.

About the Author

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»O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side!«

William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

Among the many challenges that Marianne Moyaert's book poses to its audience, one of the most potent and difficult is the notion that the post-enlightenment readers of this volume are often creative continuators of past patterns of religionization (Moyaert 2024: 1–9). While there is a great temptation to see ourselves as ›outside‹ history, interpreting it with rational objectivity, Moyaert rightly points out that we are shaped by the very same forces we discuss with the pretense of reasoned distance. That pretense is especially visible when we are challenged to speak about ›others‹ or conflicts in which our own ›enlightened‹, liberal tolerance is challenged, and the guises of our ›reasonable‹ and ›rational‹ analyses are revealed as new masks for old patterns.

One of most clear and poignant examples of this most recently has been with the European self-reckoning as a result of the ›migration crisis‹ in the Mediterranean Sea. The discourse within Europe about migrants, immigrants and ›others‹ cross the major fault lines of home, belonging, dignity and justice. The lines of this conflict have been especially visible and vitriolic when it comes to Europe's Muslim communities, often resulting in age-old patterns of othering. In these discourses and enacted policies, the rational, reasonable actor stands before the irrational, backward and irredeemable other. For a scholar of religious history in Spain, many of these patterns are all too familiar. In this essay, I would like to explore some of the patterns observable from the medieval and early modern Spanish context and utilize Moyaert's religionization framing to reflect upon their continuity in the present day, especially with regard to European Muslim communities. Moving between sixteenth century Spanish and contemporary examples, the essay endeavors to show that while languages, contexts and texts may vary, the sites of contestation of identity and religion continue to follow many long established, albeit alterable, patterns.

In her fourth chapter, Moyaert charts the slow death of religious pluralism within medieval Spain, focused especially on Jewish communities and their ›othering‹ within their homeland. For those unfamiliar with the Spanish context, scholars of the Western Mediterranean generally agree that 1492 is a pivotal turning point with the expulsion of the Jews marking the symbolic end of one age and the ushering in of a new one. Following the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and a brief decade of reprieve from forced conversion, the Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula were given a choice to either convert to Catholicism, face execution or be expelled from Spain. While wealthier Muslims were able to flee their homeland and afford the costly migration to North Africa and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, those who remained behind were forced to accept baptism. As Moyaert notes in the opening of her chapter, following the unification of the crowns of Aragon and Castile, religious diversity became increasingly threatening to the metaphor of Corpus Christianum or a single body in Christ (Id.: 113). Among the Muslims who stayed and were baptised, the majority continued practicing Islam throughout the sixteenth century (Barletta 2005). These communities became known as Moriscos and much that we know about them comes from inquisition records about their trials over the century, and their own extant written works in manuscript which overwhelmingly concern religious and devotional topics.

While there is much to say about the devotional writings of these communities, one of the most intriguing aspects of their extant works is visible even to a non-specialist eye with the combinations of multiple languages and scripts.[1] Their devotional works contain Arabic, Romance and Arabic and Romance script combinations, known as Aljamiado. The Morisco communities who wrote and utilised these works operated in a linguistic world of multiple registers, all of which they deemed suitable for their most sacred and religious materials. The language of the texts reveals much about how these communities saw themselves within Spain, as active participants in the devotional worlds in which they lived. In other words, they were at home being Spanish Muslims. For the nation-building project of the time however, this was an anathema and totally in opposition to the idea of a Catholic Spanish nation. How to deal with these communities became the ongoing crisis within the Spanish crown and by the end of the sixteenth century, the calls for Morisco expulsion emerged triumphant (Dadson 2006; Ehlers 2006). After over 900 years of Muslim presence in the Iberian peninsula, the last Muslims were forcibly expelled between 1609–1614. Of the few documents we can trace back to these communities following their expulsion, several are composed only in Romance, both language and script (Asín 1933).[2] In these works, we find a last attempt to hold on to the language of their people, before disappearing into the larger linguistic contexts in which they now found themselves.

Compared to this period, Muslims in Europe today obviously have a much better situation; they are not forcibly being converted to another faith, and they are, to a large extent, able to practice their religion openly. However, shades of the past continue to colour the present, and the discussion of how much Islam is tolerable for Europe still dominates discourses. Just as in early modern Spain, the topic of women and the ownership and/or visibility of their bodies takes centre stage. In sixteenth century Spain, all outward forms of Islam were prohibited, including any perceptions of dress, hygiene practices such as ritual washing or washing on certain days, languages and cultural practices associated with Islam (Harvey 1992). In densely populated areas and urban areas especially, Muslims were often forced to conceal their religious practices and/or go underground (Barletta 2005). Morisco women played a key role in the preservation and dissemination of religious materials in this context. Scholars have shown how Morisco women acted as transmitters of knowledge during this period (Harvey 2006: 185–191),[3] safeguarding key Muslim rituals around birth and death ceremonies and prayers (Perry 2005), and how Morisco women preserved scripture and sacred texts using their own bodies and clothing as shields and hiding places (Surtz 2001). Much of the inquisition gaze and ire therefore was directed at Muslim women during this period.

If we examine cultural and political discourses from the last two decades alone in Europe, Muslim women, their bodies, their clothing, their choices and their intellects are regularly dissected and discussed. The most glaring example of course is in France, where under the auspices of

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1   See Biblioteca Tomás Navarro Tomás CSIC, Madrid, Aljamiado Manuscript Collection.

2   Also, the works of Morisco author Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Ḥajarī contain several linguistic registers in the post-expulsion manuscripts attributed to him. See for instance the ›Bologna Manuscript‹ or University of Bologna, MS D. 565.

3   See Mancebo de Arevalo's recollections about Nuzaita and Mora Ubayda.

›secular liberalism‹, Muslim women's bodies are controlled and regulated by what the state sees fit. France is by no means alone, and many other countries and institutions within Europe have taken it upon themselves to impose bans on certain kinds of clothing, wraps and head and body wear, all in the name of protecting and ›enlightening‹ Muslim women. Enlightenment and liberation are among the new key words for the old salvation discourses that triumphed in medieval and early modern Spain.

If we look back to 16th century Spain, this pattern of nation building via the control of the Muslim body is all too familiar (Harvey 1992). So too is the concept that all oppressive measures against a particular community are for their own benefit, and towards the advantage of building a stronger nation. Most of the vocal advocates for Morisco forced conversion and their eventual expulsion, found it to be in the best interest of the Moriscos (Kamen 1988). Even with those figures who took more ›lenient‹ positions with regard to conversion (such as the first archbishop of Granada, Hernando de Talavera), their compassion only extended to the degree to which the conversion should be forced. The need for conversion was not contested, as this was a matter of salvation, both for the individual and for the nation. Although the discourses of secular, ›enlightened‹ European liberals have largely abandoned the jargon of salvation, the pattern beyond the language remains. A desire for the liberation of Muslim people for their own good is thus framed as angelic innocence. However, for Muslim communities in Europe today, the message from much of the media and political class is a challenge to conform to (what are themselves deeply contested notions of) secular and liberal values or to face rejection.

A question that emerges when examining any pattern is whether a society desires its continuity or to break free from it. The messy entanglements of nation-building and religionization during the reconquista which Moyaert discusses in her third and fourth chapters, demonstrate how many ›turning-points‹ there were in the history of religious pluralism during this period. Put another way, there were many moments in which the ›inevitability‹ we often ascribe to historical events were anything but foreseeable at the time. In fact, they were very much being constructed and created in the moment, as they continue to be today. Europe often struggles with Islam, but this is not inevitable. If European self-identity contended with the fact that in addition to Christianity, ›Europe‹ has been shaped by Jewish and Muslim thought and practice for centuries, very different paths may open. Instead of viewing the world in irreconcilable binaries and starting with an awareness of our patterns of religionization /nationalization that obscure concrete historical realities, a very different history of Europe will present itself. One in which it is a matter of historical record that Muslim communities formed and shaped Europe, from the smallest villages in the far-off corners to the urban centers, and to the largest civilizational trends (Menocal 1987; Dürr 2020). Muslims and Jews are a part of the fabric of these lands and of the stories which shape their histories.

For the early modern monarchs of Spain, their favored mechanism for nation building was through purity narratives, or limpieza de sangre. Although they moved into the Alhambra palace after the conquest of Granada, they rejected Spanishness as intertwined with Islam and the concept of Spanish Muslim was now determinedly impossible. And yet, Spanish Muslims persisted for over

a century and Islam in Spain remained. Even when the nation building project entered its most conformist phase and the last Muslims were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (Magnier 2010), troves of their documents and material culture remained, testifying to the historical reality of the ›Spanish nation‹ as a firmly contested one by its Muslim population during the sixteenth century.

Like any nation building project, the choices made within European debates of what kind of cultures, religions, peoples and practices should be included in notions of self and other, represent critical junctures. In the late medieval and early modern Spanish context, the choices made at such turning points represent pivotal moments at which history may have taken a very different turn. The patterns that emerge from this period demonstrate the slow demise of ambiguities and multiplicities, and simultaneous rise of immutabilities and conformities. One of the most significant conclusions from Moyaert's call to see the patternization in our historical and contemporary contexts is therefore, that ongoing European notions of self-understanding must accept what is at stake when a historical reality of entanglement is rejected in favour of an imagined notion of national purity. One need only look to the fate of medieval and early modern Spanish Jews and Muslims in order to understand how costly the stakes can be.

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