Thomas Jürgasch

»For I have been a stranger in a strange land«

Church-historical reflections on selfing and othering as interpretative categories of early Christian identity formation

Zusammenfassung

Die Frage religiöser Identitätsbildung wird derzeit vielfach vor dem Hintergrund der Deutungskategorien von Selfing und Othering diskutiert. Einen solchen Ansatz verfolgt auch die von Marianne Moyaert entwickelte Konzeption der ›religionization‹, die eine Reihe zentraler Aspekte religiöser Identitätsbildungen beleuchtet. Anhand von Beispielen aus der christlichen Apologetik des 2. und 3 Jahrhunderts und frühen Begegnungen zwischen syrischen Christen und Muslimen im 7.–9. Jahrhundert lotet der vorliegende Artikel die Reichweite des von Moyaert entwickelten Theoriemodells aus und weist auf die Stärken und die Grenzen dieses Ansatzes hin.

Summary

The question of religious identity formation is currently often discussed against the background of the interpretative categories of selfing and othering. The concept of ›religionization‹ developed by Marianne Moyaert, which illuminates a number of central aspects of religious identity formation, also pursues such an approach. Using examples from Christian apologetics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries and early encounters between Syrian Christians and Muslims in the 7th–9th centuries, this article explores the scope of the theoretical model developed by Moyaert and points out the strengths and limitations of this approach.

About the Author

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What is it that makes us who we are? What determines our identity as a community or as a group? And what defines me as an individual? According to a widely held and certainly plausible view, especially in the social sciences and increasingly also in the theological sciences, to answer such questions, one must refer to two processes that are closely linked and co-dependent. These are the processes of so-called ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹. A reception of this approach that focuses on the question of the formation of religious identities can be found, for example, in Marianne Moyaerts' book »Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization«, published in spring 2024. In this work, Moyaert outlines a history of Christian identity formation, which she seeks to unfold against the backdrop of the aforementioned categories of selfing and othering. As Moyaert argues, the formation of the self of religious groups, their »selfing« in the sense of a »construction of an imagined normative identity« (Moyaert 2024: 1) always takes place in a reciprocal relationship with processes of othering that consist of »creations of a deviant and hence illegitimate other« (Moyart 2024: 2).[1] Therefore, as in the case of social identities in general, the frame of religious identities too is formed through the differentiation from other, in this case religious, identities. This applies regardless of whether there are actually ›others‹ who would identify themselves with any supposed identity that certain religious groups will use in the context of othering to form their own normative identity. Rather contrary: The ›other‹ is very often to be considered a creation or fantasy of the party that is trying to form its identity. To refer to such »co-dependent processes of ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹ that are predicated on religious difference« Moyaert uses the term »religionization« that is »akin to and intersects with notions like ethnicization, gendering, and racialization« (Moyaert 2024: 1). Regarding the corresponding distinguishing features that form the basis for processes of religionization, one can think of various elements, such as beliefs, practices, aestheticizations etc.[2]

As indicated, Moyaert's conception appears quite convincing on various levels. The idea that we need a relevant difference, a *differentia specifica*, as one might say in classical terms, to determine something as *something*, is also firmly anchored in our everyday logic and seems to make intuitive sense to us. Taking up this principle, Moyaert draws on a wide range of examples from

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1   Moyaert's approach is based on a whole series of preliminary works on the concept of »Othering« as a hermeneutic category for describing processes of identity formation. For an overview of the development of this approach see Gingrich 2011; Jensen 2011.

2   Important aspects of such identity constructions based on forms of »Othering« have already been examined, for example, with regard to the construction of so–called orthodox identities in contrast to so–called heretical identities. For this see Le Boulluec 1985; Iricinschi/Zellentin 2008: 1–27; Berzon 2016; Flower 2024: 57–79.

the history of Christian identity formation to illustrate how such identities have developed through processes of *religionization*. In the course of history, European Christians in particular, so Moyaert argues, have constructed various categories of *otherness* to construct and project normative meanings of *Christianness*: ›the Jew‹, the so-called ›pagan‹ or the so-called ›Mohammedan‹ (Moyaert 2024: 1). As such, these groups and their correspondingly constructed ›other‹-identities have functioned as foils, the backdrop against which, at different times and in different ways, forms of normative Christian identities have been formed.

While Moyaert's model is compelling, a closer look at the history of Christian identity formation, for example in (late) antiquity, shows that this perspective requires further differentiation. We can ask, for instance, who was actually actively involved in the described forms of Christian religionization and who was not, and how exactly the relevant actors carried out the processes of religionization.[3] Another aspect relates to the consequences of these identity formation processes, for example for those to whom the corresponding forms of Christian identity were ascribed: Who is performing the selfing/othering, in other words: the religionization? And how did the intended audience (the Christian ingroup) react?

In the following paragraphs, these questions will be examined to explore the scope of the theoretical model of religionization just outlined. To this end, I will focus on two examples from the time of early Christianity and on corresponding forms of Christian identity formation. This concerns the topic of religionization in relation to two categories of »others« that Moyaert addresses: the so-called »pagan« on the one hand and the so-called »Mohammedan« on the other, although in what follows I will use the term »Muslim« to denote the second category.[4] Thus, in a first step, I will consider some aspects of how Christian Apologetic theologians of the second and third centuries, using Tertullian as a key example, positioned themselves in relation to their surrounding pagan Roman and Greek cultures. Here, I will examine to what extent in the context of this form of Apologetic Theology processes of ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹ can actually be observed as foundational moments of Christian identity formation in the sense of Moyaert's concept of *religionization*. In a second step, I will extend this perspective to early encounters between Syriac Christians and Muslims, as documented in sources from the 7th to 9th centuries CE. In a third and final step, I will summarise the results of the analysis and explain the consequences for possible assessments of the described theoretical model in particular and the question of Christian identity formation in general.

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3   One could, of course, call into question whether the concept of »religion« can be used in such a time-transcending way at all and whether it can thus be applied equally to ancient, modern or contemporary phenomena, for example. Valuable reflections on the concept of religion in the context of historical research, especially on late antiquity, and on the afore–mentioned questions can be found in Hunt 2018: 9–30; Nongbri 2008: 440–460.

4   For the Christian concept of »pagan« see Jürgasch 2016: 115–138; regarding the research debate on the Christian understanding of *pagani*, see also Gassman 2020: 1–6.

1. Religionization in the Context of Early Christian Apologetics?

There is much to suggest that Christian systematic theology began in the era of so-called »Christian Apologetics«. As Jörg Rüpke writes:

> Christian theology as a system was initially developed by the Christian apologists, philosophically educated people who, from the second century CE onwards, attempted to provide a ›defence‹ (apology) of Christianity by describing Christians as a morally superior cult community and by presenting Christianity in the categories of ancient Greek philosophy in order to make it accessible to non-Christians: You think we are the scum of the human race, but what we practise is basically a quite reasonable religion after all, which you non-Christians should at least recognise as an honourable option on second thought. (Rüpke 2006: 119)

As indicated here, the context of Apologetics is particularly interesting for our topic because this form of theology developed at a time when – at least according to the proponents of this kind of theology – Christian faith itself was, in theory and practice, in a relationship of *otherness* to its pagan Roman and Greek surrounding cultures. As such, the Christian faith, or so the Apologists argued, had to justify and defend itself against the pagan Romans, as it appeared to be a suspicious and logically absurd religious path. From this perspective, the most serious obstacle to the integration of Christians into their pagan-dominated neighbouring cultures proved to be the specific form of their monotheism, which as such not only affected questions of religion, but also central facets of the political, social, and cultic spheres.[5] By not only denying the existence of the pagan Roman world of gods and goddesses, but also consistently not participating in the corresponding sacrificial practices, Christians not only appeared to their pagan fellow citizens as suspicious, eccentric and unintellectual. Additionally, they were also perceived as a threat to the cosmic, political, and social order of the empire, as their refusal to participate in the sacrificial cults fundamentally jeopardised the peace between gods and humans (*pax deorum*) – another point where the sphere of religion intersects with those of the political and the social. The background to this is the pagan Roman idea that the aforementioned forms of order only remained intact if the gods were given their due sacrifices, so that – thus appeased – they in turn could fulfil their task of maintaining order in the state, society, and cosmos. However, if people jeopardised this order by not participating in the sacrifices and thus disregarding this *do-ut-des*-principle that was central to Roman religiosity, it was to be feared that the goddesses and gods would no longer perform their duties or – worse still – turn against Rome and its citizens. As one can imagine, such behaviour did little to enhance the reputation of the then still fledgling Christian religion but instead gave rise to mistrust and resentment on the part of the pagan Romans, which often, though not always manifested itself in local and, from the 3rd century onwards, state-orches-

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5   The phenomenon of so-called ›pagan monotheism‹ illustrates that not every form of monotheism was suspect from a pagan Roman perspective. On the topic of ›pagan monotheism‹, see Mitchell/Van Nuffelen 2010; Gassman 2020.

trated persecutions.[6] One of the main tasks for those educated circles of the Christian elite, who felt called upon to *defend* (namely as apologists) and justify their Christian faith against the corresponding pagan accusations, gave rise to some important works of early Christian theology. These works by authors such as Justin Martyr, Aristides Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Minucius Felix and Tertullian are characterised by the fact that, adopting the rationality standards of the time, they pointed out two things in particular, which Rüpke's quote also mentions: 1) We Christians represent a reasonable religion that stands up to intellectual standards. And 2) we are not morally depraved subjects who jeopardise the order of the cosmos but are morally upstanding fellow citizens. In particular, the second aspect is interesting for us here, as it indicates that the leading theologians of the time considered it a central goal to refute the accusation of *otherness* levelled against them and to present themselves as *non-other*, especially with regard to rationality and morality. In the course of this, such theologians did not engage in othering on a variety of levels, but rather identified similarities and sameness with regard to their own Romanity, their *Romanitas*. Accordingly, in acts of, one could say, »*samenessing*«, they emphasised that being part of their pagan surrounding culture was an essential part of their identity. Justin Martyr, for example, emphasises in his *Apology* that Christians, as good citizens, paid their taxes punctually and regularly because they had been instructed so by Christ himself (cf. Mt 22:15–17) and that although they only worshipped God, they joyfully obeyed the emperor, to whom Justin's Apology is explicitly addressed, by recognising him as king and ruler of men.[7] The Pseudo-Pauline Pastoral Epistles, written around 100, already call on their addressees to pray for the welfare of all those in power so that they can live piously and righteously without being disturbed. Works such as the Paidagogós of Clement of Alexandria, developed ideals of Christian civic education and the art of living that were largely characterised by pagan philosophical, especially Stoic, principles. Such writings emphasised that Christians were to be regarded as morally upstanding fellow citizens who lived according to the standards of moral reason that were valid at the time. Clement, for example, considered the Stoic ›way of life‹ to be well suited to what he saw as an ideal Christian lifestyle. The same was true on the intellectual-philosophical level, for example from the perspective of Justin, who defined the relationship between classical Greek philosophy and Christian wisdom. While Justin certainly emphasised the superiority of Christian wisdom, he was so strongly oriented towards the methods and content of this very philosophy that he was able to characterise Christian thought as the »only reliable and useful philosophy«[8].

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6   As Éric Rebillard has recently pointed out, this traditional view of the logic of the persecution of Christians, which has been shaped above all by apologetic theology, should be subjected to critical scrutiny: »(…) [G]eneral statements on Christian ›atheism‹ leading to their social isolation and kindling hatred among the non–Christian population need to be revised«. Cf. Rebillard 2023: 89; for a more traditional view on the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire see Middleton 2021: 229–250; with regard to more general aspects of the relationship between the early Christians and Roman society, see Clark 2004: 16–37; Salzman 2008: 186–202.

7   Justin, *Apology* I, 17 (Source Chrétiennes 508, 176–179).

8   Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 8,1 (ed.Goodspeed, 99): φιλοσοφίαν ἀσφαλῆ τε καὶ σύμφορον. It is Justin's idea of the logos spermatikos that lies at the heart of his assumption that only Christianity owns the full (revealed) truth. See Justin, *Apology* II,13 (SChr 508, 360–365), further: *Apology* I,44, (SChr 508, 242–247).

That Christianity was not a foreign body in Roman society, especially in everyday life, but an integral part of it, is also emphasised by Tertullian when he writes in *Apology* 42:1–3:

> For us Christians we have the same food, clothing and education and the same vital needs […]. Therefore we live together with you not without your forum, not without your market, not without your baths, bazaars, workshops, inns, weekly markets and other trading places. We also go to sea with you, we are farmers and soldiers like you and trade with you. In addition, we are involved in crafts and make our products available to you all.[9]

These acts of samenessing show that when it comes to talking to (or writing for) *non*-Christians, Christian authors, who at least in the first three centuries still belonged to a minority, carefully avoided too much othering.[10] These early Christian processes of religionization therefore operate differently when pursued from a minority perspective: Since religionization in the case of the apologists addresses an ingroup that still has no secure position in society, it is accompanied by a quite different message – in the form of samenessing – directed to the majority outgroup. Once Christianity became the dominant majority – e. g. in the Middle Ages – these forms of samenessing were no longer necessary.

It is now time to turn to writings that address Christians and are therefore more likely to show processes of religionization: The fact that apologetic authors such as Justin, Clement or Tertullian referred in many respects to the integration of Christians into Roman culture and emphasised sameness does not, of course, mean that these authors did not also identify and clearly name lines of conflict between Christianity and paganism. As if that were not enough, they regarded these othernesses – namely their own and that of others – as constitutive elements of their own identity, and so important facets of the basic principles of selfing and othering mentioned above can indeed be recognised here in works that address the Christian ingroup, such as sermons, letters to fellow Christians, acts of martyrs, catechetical treatises etc.. Obviously, this related first and foremost to the religious sphere, in which the Christian monotheistic confession functioned as a decisive dividing line especially to the so-called ›polytheistic Pagans‹. As already indicated above, religion is also an important factor in this context because it also extended and radiated into many other social and cultural areas that we would perhaps not associate with religion today. This is expressed in the following quote from the Octavius, a work by Minucius Felix, who also belongs to the apologetic spectrum and who puts the following quote into the mouth of his pagan fellow citizen Caecilius Natalis:

> You are always worried and restless and also keep away from honourable pleasures (*honestis voluptatibus abstinetis*). You do not attend spectacles (*non spectaculis visitis*), you do not take part in processions (*pompae*); you are absent from public banquets (*convivia publica*) and sacred battles (*sacra certamina*).[11]

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9   Tertullian, *Apology* 42,1–3 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, 156–157).

10   Accordingly, a connection can also be observed here between forms of othering or samenessing and certain literary genres. While Christian texts aimed primarily at the pagan outgroup, such as Tertullian's *Apologeticus* or, Clement's *Protreptikos* tend to be characterised by samenessing, works aimed at the Christian ingroup, such as sermons, acts of the martyrs, catechetical treatises, or Christian apocalyptic writings often exhibit a greater degree of (anti–Pagan) othering.

11   Minucius Felix, Octavius 12,5 (ed. Kytzler, 10).

While we would, for example, associate the talk of processions with aspects of religion, such an association with religion is probably not obvious to the non-specialist in the case of »honourable amusements«, »spectacles«, »public banquets« or »sacred battles«. However, the so-called *spectacles (spectacula)* in particular, which as a collective term encompassed events of various kinds such as chariot races, gladiator fights, but also theatre performances, had a decidedly religious character. As the aforementioned religious studies scholar Jörg Rüpke explains, »the games were originally above all a valuable gift for the gods« (Rüpke 2016: 149) and therefore not mere entertainment events, even though their pagan spectators in Tertullian's time may not have turned their attention primarily to the religious nature of the *spectacula*. However, someone who was clearly aware of this religious facet was the aforementioned Tertullian, who dedicated an entire book to his aversion to the roman games, in which he explained in vivid detail that attending the games was not an option for Christians. For Tertullian, this was particularly true due to the religious dimension of the *spectacula* as a cult gift for pagan gods and the moral corruption they bring about in the spectators. Thus, nothing related to the games was pleasing to God, as Tertullian in his *On the Spectacles* explains. Rather, they represent a »dazzling work of the devil (*pompa diaboli*)«[12], »equipped from the devil's arsenal«. Tertullian considered attending the games to be so incompatible with a Christian lifestyle that he even defined staying away from the spectacula as an identity marker of Christianity par excellence: it was »precisely this attitude by which they [the Pagans] are most likely to recognise that someone has become a Christian: by his refusal to attend spectacles (*de repudio spectaculorum*)!«[13] A form of religious othering and the associated selfing par excellence, one could say, as here the brand essence of Christianity is emphasised in the differentiation from certain practices that belonged to the religious sphere. Although time does not permit a more detailed discussion of Tertullian's spectacula criticism here, two aspects of it are important for my argumentation:

Firstly, a closer look reveals that in many respects Tertullian's criticism overlaps both in form and content, with the *spectacula* criticism of Pagans belonging to the educational elite, especially Stoic philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca (see Metz (forthcoming); Weismann 1972: 89–90. For the Roman authors see Mammel 2014: 603–616). This can even be seen in the terminology used by Tertullian, who, for example, sees the *tranquilitas* of the soul and its *immobilitas* jeopardised by the concussion of the spirit (*concussio spiritūs*), which results from the affects (*affectūs*) and the passions that are aroused by attending the games.[14] Paradoxically, therefore, essential aspects of Tertullian's anti-Pagan othering appear to be congruent precisely with Pagan arguments, which Stoic philosophers in particular used to differentiate their own ideals of leisure from those that many of their fellow Pagans consider to be decisive for themselves. If anything, one could conclude at this point, that forms of (religious) othering recognised here originate not so much in the difference between Christian and pagan, but primarily between representatives of the Christian as well as the pagan educated elite on the one hand and the followers of more popular

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12   Tertullian, *On the spectacles* 24,2 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, 248).

13   Tertullian, *On the spectacles* 24,3 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, 248).

14   Tertullian, *On the spectacles* 15,2–6 (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, 240–241).

leisure pursuits on the other. Tertullian is thus adopting an existing pagan form of othering, applying it now to the dichotomy between Christianness and Paganism as he conceives it.

A second aspect that stands out at this point concerns the question of who actually took part in the forms of othering that Tertullian pursued and what this participation looked like. The vehemence of the theologian's criticism of attending the plays suggests that many of the Christians he addressed obviously found some pleasure in these visits. Tertullian's text gives some indication that this was indeed the case, for example when he discusses the justifications that some Christians gave for their *spectacula* visits. Another example is provided by the case reported by Tertullian of a Christian woman who was possessed by a demon during a visit to the theatre.[15] The ›social logic‹ that underlies Tertullian's text in these passages, to take up a methodological approach developed by Gabrielle Spiegel and applied by Eric Rebillard (Spiegel 1990: 59–86; Rebillard 2012) among others, was obviously such that many of the people who saw themselves as Christian did not participate in the form of othering pursued by Tertullian. For – much to the displeasure of Tertullian and other theologians in his wake, such as later Augustine or Quodvultdeus – a considerable number of his fellow Christians apparently continued to visit the *spectacula*. Otherwise, Tertullian's argument, especially in its vehemence, would have made little sense. Accordingly, the well-founded suspicion arises that there were forms of othering that were only pursued by a small part of the Christian population at the time, without this reflecting the behavior or beliefs of the majority of Christians. This means that, when applying the approach of religionization, it is crucial to take into account who performs the act of religionization, what their position in the studied Christian society is and what impact their performed religionization had in and on this society. Our example shows that Tertullian obviously held a very prominent position, not least because of his high social and theological status. At the same time, however, his position, in terms of content, was probably only held by a minority of his fellow Christians so that his efforts largely failed.[16]

Interestingly, with regard to the questions of *who* actually practised *which forms of othering* and *religionization* and how successful the corresponding attempts of establishing a normative Christian identity were, striking parallels can be observed with regard to a temporally and geographically completely different area of church history: the Middle East of the 7th–9th centuries and the encounters between Syriac Christian and early Islamic religiosity that took place there.

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15   Tertullian, *On the spectacles* 2–3 (excuses) and 26 (possessed woman) (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, 228–231 and 249).

16   This can for example be seen in the fact that the demand to eschew the Roman games is a refrain of Christian preaching and catechesis throughout the following centuries.

2. Early encounters between Syriac Christians and Muslims (7th–9th century)

As Michael Philip Penn explains, our image of the earliest encounters between Christians and Muslims was long characterized by reports originating in the Greek or Latin-speaking Christian world, which, under the impression of warlike conflicts, sometimes have strongly polemical traits (Penn 2015a: 2–3). Historically, however, Syriac-speaking Christians came into contact with Muslims much earlier, as they lived under Muslim rule in Syria from the mid-630s at the latest, and thus actually met and coexisted with Muslims.[17] These encounters resulted in texts that offer a different perspective on the relationship between Christianity and Islam than authors such as John of Damascus or Beda Venerabilis, who both accused Muslims of worshipping Aphrodite.[18] It is thanks to the increasing research interest in the relevant Syriac-Christian sources in recent years that our image of the first Christian-Muslim encounters has changed considerably (Penn 2015b: 3; with references to Crone/Cook 1977; Hoyland 1997; Thomas et al. 2009). But what do these Syriac reports reveal?[19]

A first, perhaps surprising point concerns the observation made by Penn that the Syriac-Christian sources do not initially seem to have been particularly interested in their conquerors' religion (Penn 2015a: 19–20). This is shown, for example, by the earliest testimonies that have come down to us, the anonymous »Chronicles of 637« and »644«, in which the conquerors are described with the help of the term *Ṭayyāyē*, which focuses on ethnic rather than religious aspects (Penn 2015b: 9–10; 2015a: 20 with references to Bertaina 2011: 78). This term, which was already in use before the conquests, referred to people who came from the Arabian Peninsula and consequently meant something like ›Arabs‹. As such, however, the term had no primarily religious connotation, so that it was still possible to speak of Christian *Ṭayyāyē* even into the 9th century. The situation is similar regarding other terms for the conquerors that were added in the 650s. These include the term ›Hagarenes‹ (*mhaggrāyē*) used by the East Syriac Catholicos Īšōʿjahb III (†659) in a letter[20] or the terms ›Sons of Ishmael‹ (*bnay ʿIshmāʿel*) or ›Ishmaelites‹ (*ʿIshmāʿelāyyē*), which are also used in the East Syriac Khuzistan Chronicle (Penn 2015a: 61; for the chronicle, see Jakob 2021: 41–47). Although the names Hagar and Ishmael obviously refer to biblical contexts (Gen 21, Gal 4), according to Penn, the emphasis of the designations is nevertheless on ethnic issues, focusing here on the lineages of the invaders (Penn 2015a: 61–62). Moreover, we learn virtually nothing from the sources of this period about the religion of the new rulers – apart from

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17 As Holger Zellentin recently pointed out, these were not the first contacts between Christians and Muslims. There were probably contacts between the Quranic community and Christians from the very beginning of Muhammad's career. Cf. Zellentin 2023.

18 Cf. Penn 2015a: 55, with reference to Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum* 7:43 (ed. Laistner, 34) and John of Damascus, Concerning Heresy 101 (Source Chrétiennes 383, 21).

19 The following line of reasoning is based primarily on Penn's reflections on the first Christian–Muslim encounters.

20 Cf. Īšōʿyahb III, Letter 48 B (Penn 2015b: 32–34; Ed.: R. Duval, Išoʿyahb Patriarcha III: Liber epistularum (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 11), 92–97; Penn 2015a: 61. For Īšōʿyahb III, see also Ioan 2009: 5–50.

the fact that, as Īšōʿjahb III reports in his letters, they appear to have been rather well-disposed towards Christianity and supported Christian monasteries and churches financially (Jakob 2021: 172). Some remarks found in another source, probably from the 660s, also point in this direction, namely the so-called ›Maronite Chronicle‹ (Penn 2015b: 54–61; 2015a: 62). It reports, among other things, that the Caliph Muʿāwiya (d. 680) first prayed at Golgotha, then in the Garden of Gethsemane and finally at the tomb of the Virgin Mary in the Kidron Valley during his coronation celebrations in Jerusalem. We also learn that the Caliph had previously presided as an arbitrator in a religious dispute between Maronite and Miaphysite Christians. What is striking in this context is that we only learn something about the Arabs' attitude towards Christianity from these early sources. Information about the religious beliefs of the conquerors themselves and their religious practices, however, cannot be found in the documents written before around 685. Therefore, at least with regard to the sources that have come down to us from this early period, the new rulers were not constructed as *religious* others against whom one would have constructed one's own Christian-religious identity by way of differentiation. Instead, it was the *ethnic* descent of the new rulers that served as a relevant criterion of difference, which is shown above all by the names used for them.

These conditions were not to change significantly until the reign of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705), who in the course of the second Islamic civil war that ended with the conquest of Mecca in 692 promoted a far-reaching Islamisation of the empire (Jakob 2021: 170–178). This brought about legal, fiscal and architectural consequences, as well as implications for the religious differentiation of Islam, which at least according to Fred Donner's admittedly rather controversial thesis, was still in the process of developing its central religious tenets at the time (Penn 2015a: 55; arguments in favour of a relatively late development of the essential religious tenets of Islam can be found in Donner 2012). One Christian reaction to these changes was that Christian authors now increasingly recognised that their conquerors had their own, different form of religion. This is shown by the example of Jacob of Edessa, who lived from around 633–708, was bishop of Edessa from 684–688 and stood out for his extremely lively literary production during and after his episcopate (for the following see Penn 2015a: 53–55, 66–69, 145–148). Of particular importance for the context discussed here are Jacob's letters in which he answers questions from other clerics about how they should behave in the context of the newly emerging interreligious situation. Both the questions posed to Jacob and his answers to them clearly show that the bishop now associated the rulers with a religious category of their own, distinct from Christianity. What is more, he was apparently quite well informed about this ›new religion‹. For example, he knew that the followers of this religious group prayed in the direction of the Kaʿaba, that they believed Jesus to be the Messiah and the Word of God, but that they rejected the idea of his sonship and had formulated their own formula of faith (Penn 2015a: 66). Jacob's in many respects rather negative attitude towards these people is, among other things, reflected in his relatively frequent usage of the term *ḥanpē* (sg. *ḥanpā*). While the word was used for polytheists before the conquests and is therefore usually translated as »Pagans«, Jacob now uses it for the *Hagarenes*, knowing full well that they are monotheists (Penn 2015a: 67).

What is exciting about Jacob's correspondence with figures such as the priest Addai or the monk John the Stylite is not only that in these letters we do indeed encounter forms of religious othering in the sense of religionization in relation to the *Hagarenes*. This is illustrated not least by Jacob's above-mentioned use of the term *ḥanpē* for the conquerors. However, at the same time, the letters call into question whether the strict demarcation between Christianity and Islam, as propagated by theologians such as Jacob, actually played a role in the everyday lives of most Christians or Muslims who did not belong to the educated elite (Tannous 2018: 258). This can be explained with the help of the following examples from Jacob's letters compiled by Penn. For example, Jakob had to deal with the question of whether a woman who is married to a *Hagarene* may nevertheless be administered the sacrament of the Eucharist; or whether a baptised person who has converted to the *ḥanpē*, but regrets it later on, must be baptised again when re-entering the church (Penn 2015a: 67). Another enquiry from Addai addresses the question of how to deal with an altar that *Ṭayyāyē* had used as a table and that was still dripping with fat (Id.: 69), or – again in another letter – whether it was legitimate to use a cloth with the *Hagarene* formula of faith embroidered on it as an altar cloth (Id.: 164). In yet another letter to John the Stylite, Jacob emphatically argues in favour of closing the doors of the churches during services so that the *Hagarenes* remain outside, as many of them were obviously attending Christian services for their own reasons (Id.: 160). According to Penn, there is also a whole series of examples from the period after Jacob insinuating that the observance of religious boundaries inculcated by theologians such as Jacob was not sufficiently taken into account, for example, when Christian holy men were reportedly called upon by *Ṭayyāyē* for assistance (Id.: 158–159) and *Hagarenes* sought the help of Christian exorcists (Id.: 159–160). Another example in this context is provided by the construction of an Umayyad mosque, which was built door to door with the Christian basilica in the Syrian city of Rusafa under Caliph Hishām (r. 724–743). The reason for this was that the Muslims wanted to be as close as possible to the shrine of the Christian soldier martyr Sergius, which was attached to the basilica. In order to gain faster access to the shrine, a door was even built into the wall facing Mecca (*qibla*) so that the believers could reach the courtyard of the church, where the shrine of the martyr was located, as quickly as possible (Fowden 2022: 134–135; Penn 2015a: 144–145). What conclusions can be drawn from the observations about the processes of Christian identity formation and the role of religionization?

3. Consequences and Conclusions

The examples from early Christian Apologetics and the earliest Christian-Muslim encounters clearly show that the thesis of identity-formation-through-religionization requires differentiation. Thus, apart from the fact that such identities were sometimes formed more by participating in forms of samenessing, as, for example, apologists such as Tertullian practised with regard to many aspects of their surrounding, Roman culture, the question must always be asked who actually carried out processes of religionization, and how relevant this was for the selfing of the majority of a religious group. To be sure, this does not mean that, in certain contexts, attempts to create religious identity through othering have not occurred. Theologians such as Tertullian or

Jacob of Odessa provide striking examples of this from the field of Christian theological identity formation.

At the same time, however, there is a whole range of external identity markers that have apparently been and still are also important for people who feel that they belong to a particular religion, and that are nevertheless not seen by these people as a threat to their religious identity. For a Roman Christian woman of the third century, for example, a visit to the *spectacula* can be seen as an expression of her Roman social identity, an identity that, from her point of view, might not have conflicted with her Christian identity which therefore was not jeopardised by a visit to the games. And a visit to the shrine of a Christian martyr would obviously not have been seen by an Islamic caliph of the 8th century as jeopardising his identity as an orthodox Muslim.

What these examples also suggest is that religious identity never exists in a vacuum but is always embedded in the context of other aspects of human identity. Since these identities influence each other, it is important to focus not only on aspects of religion when considering the formation of religious identity. Rather, it is also essential to consider other facets of human identity, such as political, social, and societal aspects, when considering processes of religionization.

If the past, to borrow a famous dictum from William Faulkner, is never dead, and perhaps not even past, then it may be possible to learn from it, especially when it comes to questions of Christian identity formation. What if this identity was and is never quite as clear-cut and monolithic as some theologians would have us believe to this day? What if, as the sociologist Bernard Lahire expounds, individual identity always consists of a plural that dynamically opens up a field of identities that are activated, as it were, depending on the situation and with the help of very different categories (Lahire 2003: 344)? If this is the case, then identity formation through othering is perhaps only one mode of religious selfing, and possibly not the most decisive one for most Christians throughout history. I hope to have laid a trail worth following, one that may enable us to change our view of the stranger, who is not only ›the other‹, but in many ways also ›the same‹ as us.

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Zeitschrift für Theologische
Studien und Kritik

2/2025: Patterns of Religionization