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Editorial

Patterns of Religionization. A Critical Discussion of a New Perspective on Interreligious Research – with a Response from Marianne Moyaert

About the Authors

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Opening new horizons in interreligious research depends on creative encounters. The Tübingen Campus of Theologies aims to foster such encounters by promoting the exchange between Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish scholars on the Campus. However, it also does so through building up and expanding international networks and inviting renowned scholars to discuss their current research, new methods, and approaches.



This issue reflects the discussions initiated by one such encounter, which has proven especially fruitful. It builds on a dialogue with the Catholic theologian and interreligious scholar Marianne Moyaert (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam / since 2023 KU Leuven) during her New Horizons Fellowship in the summer term of 2022. The New Horizons Fellowship program of the University of Tübingen is funded through the Excellence Initiative of the German federal and state governments and aims at the invitation of outstanding international scholars to discuss new approaches, methods, and ideas. At the heart of the discussions of Marianne Moyaert's Fellowship was the critical engagement with Moyaert's research on ›patterns of religionization‹, that is on the structure and mechanisms of the discursive creation and differentiation of ›good‹ (›true‹, ›pure‹, ›healthy‹, ›sincere‹, ›enlightened‹, ...) religion from ›bad‹ (›false‹, ›impure‹, ›pernicious‹, ›dangerous‹, ›fanatic‹, ...) religion through codependent processes of ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹ amidst asymmetrical power relations in the history of Christian and Post-Christian (Western) Europe.

Such a topic is evidently of crucial relevance to any place that aims at a (self)critical form of doing interreligious dialogue and research as the Tübingen Campus of Theologies does. To critically address and avoid the reproduction of stereotypes and asymmetrical power relations in one's own research and in dialogue initiatives, however, is more challenging than it might appear at first sight. Interreligious studies in Western-European (post-)Christian societies do not occur in a neutral terrain but are strongly conditioned by multiple social, political, cultural, legal, and institutional aspects that shape its structure and format as well as the expectations of its participants and the politicians, university representatives, religious communities and other stakeholders who fund and promote such projects. This is true for all interreligious dialogue settings. It especially applies to interreligious research and dialogue initiatives at the university level, the establishment of which in German-speaking countries for example has been accompanied by high expectations of fostering interreligious understanding and harmony, religious self-critique, and the taming of fundamentalist and integralist tendencies, both within and outside of academia.

However, while these objectives certainly match legitimate concerns, it often remains overseen and neglected how profoundly even post-Christian ›liberal‹ perspectives on ›religion‹, ›religious difference and pluralism‹, ›interreligious dialogue‹, the ›secular‹ etc. are imbued with the long history of (Western) Christianity. What counts as ›proper‹ ›religion‹ and ›theology‹ and what does not, as well as the question which disciplines, methods, and places are the most appropriate to discuss and decide on such issues, is still strongly instilled with social imaginaries, normative assumptions and institutional arrangements that are deeply anchored in (Western) Europe's historical experience with Christianity, especially in its Protestant variants (cf. for a critical discussion the contributions in: Danz/Deibl 2023).

This is not to claim – in a simplistic mode – that »Western secularity« can or should be understood as merely a product of (Western) Christianity, but builds on the more nuanced argument that the way in which ›religion‹, ›religious difference‹ and ›religious pluralism‹ are perceived, discussed, and dealt with in contemporary societies cannot be properly understood if what Moyaert describes as the history of Christian religionization is ignored.

Critical forms of interreligious dialogue and research have to tackle these conditions in a self-critical and attentive way in order not to reproduce stereotypes and power asymmetries within interreligious dialogue itself. This is particularly important in interreligious settings such as the Campus of Theologies in Tübingen, where members of religious and denominational traditions with very different histories and big differences in terms of institutional embedding and public standing come, live and work together. Critical awareness is essential to avoid the unilateral imposition of categories, methods, and institutional arrangements that so-called ›minority‹ groups experience as misrepresenting or distorting their way of understanding, living, and reflecting upon their religious traditions. Further, it is just as necessary to also address the bigger structural issues that are often beyond the immediate influence of individual scholars and dialogue participants and require changes on a more structural (societal or political) level.

Marianne Moyaert's research on patterns of religionization, the results of which have been published last year in *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization* (Moyaert 2024), are an invitation, a stimulus, and a challenge to think about these issues more critically and seriously. The Tübingen Campus of Theologies with its scholars from different religious and denominational traditions and its broad international networks in turn offers propitious conditions for a critical, multilayered, and multiperspective discussion of Moyaert's thoughts, allowing for an interreligious, intercultural, and interdisciplinary engagement with her study.

To guide readers of this issue, this introduction 1) briefly summarizes the core ideas of Moyaert's study on patterns of religionization, 2) explains the rationale, structure, and central aims of this issue's way of engaging with it, and 3) provides a short overview of the respective contributions.

1. Patterns of Religionization

Marianne Moyaert's study of patterns of religionization, the discussion of which is at the heart of this issue, anchors in her long-term experience as an interreligious scholar and teacher. It starts from the observation of the startling tenacity with which seemingly age-old patterns of stereotyping and discrimination persist even in well-intended, seemingly critical, tolerant, and liberal interreligious dialogue settings.

Following David Nirenberg's warning against the »peril of fantasizing our freedom from the past« (cf. Moyaert 2024: 9), Moyaert claims that these patterns will inform and misguide our perception of the religious other even in (post)secular, post-Christian settings as long as they are not studied and addressed critically.

Against this background, Moyaert sets out to trace the genealogies of the patterns of religious othering she observes in her teaching experience in the history of (Western) European Christianity, adopting therefore a *longue durée* approach. Building on the findings of historical research, critical theory, post- and decolonial studies, critical race theory, and other disciplines, Moyaert's study explores how the creation of Christian normativity, in different socio-political contexts, was linked to the discursive production and representation of symbolic ›others‹. The study thus does

not focus on ›real‹ differences – which historical studies demonstrate to be far more entangled, ›messy‹, and disputed – but on the construction of symbolic binaries and stereotypes of these ›others‹ amid asymmetrical power relations. Such binaries and stereotypes do of course not merely inhabit an abstract space but in turn inform concrete policies, church and governmental practices and are sometimes even brutally inscribed into the flesh of those considered or made to be ›other‹. Hence, despite being imaginaries, the studied patterns heavily mold the complex realities ›on the ground‹, which they at the same time make invisible and overshadow.

Such a research project is in line with the postcolonial analysis of processes of ›othering‹ as pioneered famously by Edward Said (Said 1978). In fact, Moyaert's study both builds on and relates to studies that analyse the fostering of other social categories of ›otherness‹ such as ›race‹, ›gender‹, ›ability‹ etc. and discusses the intersections of processes of racialization and gendering with the production of ›good‹ and ›bad‹ religion. Given the strong Christian and especially Protestant imprint of the concept of ›religion‹ (and its counterpart ›the secular‹), Moyaert refers to the Christian fostering of religious difference likewise as a process of ›religionization‹, that is the discursive making and demarcation of ›good‹ (›true‹, ›pure‹, ›healthy‹, ›sincere‹,...) from ›bad‹ (›false‹, ›impure‹, ›pernicious‹, ›dangerous‹,...) religion through codependent processes of religious selfing and othering.

Moyaert's study is therefore linked to the growing body of post- and decolonial studies on interreligious encounters, religious pluralism and difference, which have gained momentum during the last two decades (cf. Asad 2003, Maldonado-Torres 2014, Rettenbacher 2019), to which it contributes in at least three significant ways:

First, the comprehensive character of Moyaert's study, which spans processes of religionization from early Christianity until the 20th century, allows to trace how different patterns combine, supersede, are rebuilt, vanish, and reappear over the centuries. It thus brings to the fore the creation of a multi-layered cultural archive that remains active even in (post)secular, post-Christian contexts and can be exploited both theologically and politically if not addressed critically – contemporary alliances between fundamentalist sectors of the Christian churches and far-right identitarian politics in the ›defense‹ of the ›Christian Occident‹ and ›values‹ against its supposed enemies being only the most recent example here (Strømme/Schmiedel 2020).

Second, the anchoring of the historical study in the experience of the author in interreligious education and dialogue programs relates the historical analysis constantly to the ways these patterns play out in contemporary settings – be it in academia, on a grassroots level, in politics, or society in general. Beyond being primarily a historical investigation, this focus makes the study also highly relevant for interfaith education.

Third, Moyaert's study builds an important bridge between comparative theology and post- and decolonial theology which in Christian theology have so far been pursued largely separately from one another. As Moyaert's study shows, an in-depth exchange between these approaches raises a whole bunch of new questions with the potential to shift the very grounds and terms of the debate on religious difference and diversity. While Moyaert's book is in this regard maybe just a

pioneering starting point for a larger discussion that needs to be followed by future research, it testifies to the high potential and fruitfulness of such a dialogue.

2. The Aim of this Issue

This issue does not aim at an exhaustive discussion of Moyaert's study but instead engages with selected aspects of it.

Its main aims are: 1) to discuss the theoretical and methodological framework of religionization from the angle of different religious and denominational traditions; 2) to explore in which ways the concept of religionization sheds new light on the study of religious (and related forms of racialized, gendered and ethnicized) differences in selected historical and cultural contexts and settings (both within and beyond the historical periods discussed by Moyaert); 3) to investigate in which ways the framework of religionization – which Moyaert develops mainly from a (Western) European Christian perspective – can be applied to or needs to be developed further, modified or complemented when related to non-Western European contexts.

To this end, we have selected authors from different backgrounds, disciplines, at different institutions and with different degrees of familiarity with the notion of religionization. Some of the authors already participated in the conversations about patterns of religionization in Tübingen during the New Horizons Fellowship in 2022, some contributed to developing the notion in other contexts, and for some, the approach was completely new. Hence, some contributions stem from relatively close areas of research and others rather build bridges from their respective fields of study. In terms of institutional affiliation, we chose a number of contributors based at the Campus of Theologies in Tübingen while adding perspectives from Israel, the Netherlands, Türkiye, the UK, and the US. In both cases, we paid attention to a confessional diversity including Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and secular voices. Responding to the different disciplinary dimensions of Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other, we asked scholars to engage with the book and the notion of religionization through historical, pedagogical, literary, and cultural perspectives, thereby applying it to different fields, proving, expanding, and criticizing it.

Thus, the aspiration of this issue is to engage with Moyaert's work on religionization in both a productive and critical way that stimulates creative new readings, extensions, and contestation of the concept of religionization from a variety of different contexts and perspectives. We hope that the dialogue initiated in this issue incites further scholarly work on the complex ways in which patterns of religionization are formed, rebuilt, debated, and contested in our daily lives, be it in academia, in religious education, interfaith initiatives, the church, the synagogue, the mosque, or in politics, society, and culture in general.

One of the limits of this issue resides, evidently, in its focus on (mainly) Jewish, Muslim, and Christian perspectives. While we tried to broaden the scope of the issue beyond a merely Western-European (although not necessarily beyond an Anglophone) perspective, we (mainly) stick to what might be called an ›Abrahamic‹ pattern. This reflects the structure of the Tübingen Campus

of Theologies with its own inherent forms of religionization. We hope that future research will overcome this limit to also include voices and perspectives of traditions that are not represented in this issue.

3. The Structure and Contributions of this Issue

The cover of this issue is illustrated with a print bearing the title »Choosing a Deity«. This print, painted by Edwin Long (1829–1891) and etched by Malcolm Osborne (1880–1963),¹ depicts a group of mainly women dressed in floating gowns with Graeco-Roman appeal at a market stall. They are looking at different figurines, some with helmet and sword, others with bow and arrow, some with angelic wings, others with a torch, others again seemingly involved in a conversation. The figurines have a certain appeal to those present; they are in the center of attention and on the left, a child approaches the stall with open arms. The background of the image reveals that the market is located in a multiethnic and potentially multireligious town, with men wearing different headgears and buildings resembling antique temples.

We chose this image as cover for this issue because of its many layers of meaning, of imagining religion and potentially the religious ›other«. The painter imagines a scenery of women choosing deities, as the title reveals. He seems to situate it in the Graeco-Roman world, albeit enriched with people from different regions in the background of the scenery. Without reading too much into the intentions of the British painter Edwin Long, who was famous for painting oriental scenes with religious appeal, the image reflects a combination of different eras, religious elements and presuppositions of what it means to ›choose a deity«. Looking at the image, several layers of observation and interpretation become visible. This multi-layeredness and multiperspectivity corresponds well with the composition of this issue, bringing together responses to Moyaert's Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other from different backgrounds and perspectives.

The issue is structured as follows:

The discussion is opened by Santiago Slabodsky (Hofstra University, USA). Arguing from a ›coloniality at large« approach, he relates Moyaerts study on patterns of religionization to Latin-American decolonial theory to propose an integration of both lines of critical thought in order to address the complex intersections of religion and race that characterize both the European and the Latin-American context. Putting critical studies from both contexts into dialogue, Slabodsky argues, can help to mobilize occluded memories of a shared history and thereby enable solidarities across the Atlantic.

¹ The print has been published online by Gravür Dünyası Digital Print Library, a visual database with antique prints from the Ottoman Empire and Türkiye, aiming at the preservation of cultural heritage. We would like to thank The World of Antique Prints (Gravür Dünyası) Digital Antique Print Library for their permission to use the image.

From the other side of the Atlantic but sharing a related concern, Hannah Visser (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands) traces the hidden patterns of religionization in the context of (Western-European) interfaith education. Combining insights from social justice education and critical interfaith studies, Visser argues that the often promoted concept of ›safe spaces‹ is not sufficient to undo the latent forms of Christian normativity still effective in (post)secular ›Western‹ societies. Instead of ›safe spaces‹, she therefore proposes that interfaith pedagogies provide ›brave spaces‹ that do not shy away from the structural difficulties and the ›discomfort‹ of working towards more just societies.

Amina Nawaz's and Thomas Jürgasch's contributions test the theoretical framework of religionization against concrete historical case studies. Amina Nawaz (Boğaziçi University, Türkiye) engages with and applies Moyaert's frame of religionization to explore European tensions with Islam and Muslims. Her 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 doing so, Nawaz 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.

Thomas Jürgasch (University of Tübingen, Germany) explores the scope and limits of Moyaert's framework of religionization against two illustrative examples from (late) Antiquity: the negotiation of the relationship between Christian Faith and Roman civic ›identity‹ in apologetic texts of the 2nd and 3rd and encounters between Syrian Christians and Muslims in the 7th–9th centuries. Building on an in-depth analysis of these examples, Jürgasch advocates for a context-sensitive analysis of religious ›identity‹ formation and argues in favor of expanding Moyaert's analysis of ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹ to include equally important processes of Christian ›identity‹ making like the form of ›samenessing‹ that is to be found in early apologetic literature.

Claire Gallien's (Cambridge Muslim College and Cambridge University, UK) contribution in turn builds on the concept of religionization to critique the deformation that Islamic theology and literature suffer when conceived according to the predominant disciplinary boundaries of Christian theology and post-Christian academia. While the former gets reduced in this framework to speculative theology, the latter is stripped of any theological relevance at all. Using the example of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Diwān*, Gallien demonstrates how the interrelated attempts to de-religionize Islamic theology and re-theologize Islamic Literature can lead the path to a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic theology.

Diana Lipton (Tel Aviv University, Israel) expands Moyaert's framework of religionization beyond an (exclusively) Christian framework and timescale by relating it to the connections between language and otherness in the Hebrew Bible. Engaging with Moyaert's argument that the remapping of the world by 18th and 19th century comparative linguists transforms older patterns of religionization while at the same time providing a bridge between explicitly religious categories and later (pseudo)biological categorizations of otherness, Lipton draws attention to both the similarities and differences of Biblical accounts of language, power, and otherness. In this light, at least some of

the features that Moyaert describes as characteristic of 19th century linguistics turn out to have a far longer and more complex history than might be expected at first sight.

Starting from the parallels that Moyaert identifies between 19th century comparative religious studies and the contemporary project of comparative theology, Elisabeth Migge (University of Tübingen, Germany) explores four elements of the latter – the claim of expertise, defining the point of comparison, the role assigned to Judaism, and the risk of exploiting the other – that can serve as gateways for an unintentional reiteration of patterns of religionization in doing comparative theology today. Migge not only shows how such a reiteration can thwart the project of comparative theology – which is generally seen by its proponents as fostering interreligious understanding and overcoming stereotypes – but also offers perspectives on how this risk can be addressed critically.

Katharina Zimmermann (University of Tübingen, Germany) at last takes up Moyaert's hint at the intersection of religionization and gendering to explore what a history of Christian gendering, that is the making of female otherness, might look like. Deliberately mirroring both methodologically and structurally Moyaert's study on religionization, Zimmermann uses three examples from different historical contexts – Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI – to show how patterns of the Christian making of the female ›other‹ can be described in parallel to the discursive fabrication of religious otherness that Moyaert is focusing on, thereby drawing attention to how the construction of the religious other ›without‹ and the female other ›within‹ are intrinsically linked to each other.

The discussion closes with a response of Marianne Moyaert that explains the rationale of the book against the background of the contributions and engages with the arguments of each of them. Moyaert discusses how the arguments and perspectives brought forward by the respective authors might relate to, question, and carry forward the framework of religionization and at the same time identifies key areas for future research. Building on a suggestion of Santiago Slabodsky, Moyaert ends with a plea for a relational hermeneutics that does not only acknowledge differences but actively contributes to the dismantling »of the historical power imbalances that have long shaped interfaith relations«.

As the dismantling of patterns of religionization is not only a matter of discourse, but also implies very concrete challenges for the way of doing interreligious dialogue and research amidst the institutional arrangements of academia, the issue concludes with a report about a workshop on interreligious practices, organized and written by Lea Schlenker and Lea Stolz (University of Tübingen, Germany) that explicitly reflects on these ›practical‹ and at the same time very fundamental questions. It highlights the connections between methodology and practice, discussing the challenges and opportunities of interreligious reflection and cooperation.

4. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Research and Excellence Strategy Division at the University of Tübingen for enabling this both inspiring and fruitful exchange with Marianne Moyaert's research

through the New Horizons Fellowship program. We equally thank all faculty members of the three theological institutions in Tübingen who have been engaged in the nomination process and organization of the fellowship program. Our special thanks goes, of course, above all to Marianne Moyaert not only for accepting the fellowship nomination, but also for her unhesitant readiness to discuss different parts of her then-still work-in-progress on patterns of religionization with students, junior and senior researchers at the University of Tübingen. The discussions and the mutual exchange during the fellowship have given fruit also beyond this issue and will hopefully find a continuation in future collaborations.

We would also like to thank Laurin Ernst, Leo Maucher, and Sophie Zender for their invaluable support in the editing process of this issue. And we would like to thank all contributors, particularly those who have been willing to engage in this dialogue from other geographical and cultural contexts. Their contributions have added important new layers and perspectives to the discussion and contributed in their own way to the opening of new horizons for critical interreligious scholarship in our increasingly globalized and at the same time painfully fragmented world.

Finally, we would like to thank the editors of the new journal *Campus der Theologien* for including this issue in the journal.

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