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Response

About the Author

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the editors of this issue of the ThCamp, Sebastian Pittl, Amina Nawaz and Lea Schlenker for organising this symposium on the occasion of the publication of my book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization* (Moyaert 2024). It is a real privilege to have both junior and senior scholars engage deeply with my work, challenging me to reflect further and think more critically. What makes this symposium even more exciting is that it is a joint initiative of Islamic, Protestant and Catholic scholars from the University of Tübingen. During the academic year 2021–2022, I was honoured to receive a *New Horizons Fellowship* from the University of Tübingen, which gave me the opportunity to present and discuss early drafts of this book. The insights and feedback I received during this time were incredibly helpful, and without it the book would not have the depth and clarity it has now. After outlining the main thrust of the book, I will engage in a conversation with the various interviewees. Their generous contributions are all food for thought.

1. Why this book?

The process of writing this book took more than six years, but the initial sense of urgency to conceptualise religionization and trace its history – especially in the context of (secularised) Christian Europe and its colonies – goes back even further and is linked to my work as an interreligious scholar and educator.

I worked for over a decade at the VU Amsterdam in the Netherlands, teaching an international student body that included Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian (mainly Protestant) and secular students, all with the aim of cultivating inter-religious dialogue skills. My approach to dialogical learning had long been informed by Ricoeur's theoretical lens of hermeneutic anthropology and narrative ethics, which emphasised meaning-making, self-reflexivity, and the sharing of stories across difference – stories being seen as the primary form through which human experience is made meaningful (Moyaert 2014). I encouraged students to move beyond polarisation by recognising both differences and similarities between themselves and those who believe and practice differently (Visser et al. 2023; Moyaert 2017). The focus was on creating what Hannah Visser calls and critiques as a safe space: »a non-threatening, encouraging environment for students to come together and deepen their understanding of different worldviews and ways of life« (Lindsay 2020: 23, quoted in Visser).

Gradually, however, I began to move away from the idea of dialogue as a purely interpersonal encounter in which the dialogues meet as equals. Indeed, I began to notice the continuing power of collective normative assumptions (and stereotypes) about what true religion is and should be, and what false religion looks like. Some beliefs and practices were frowned upon, resisted or even denigrated. These religious expressions were seen not just as different, but as abnormal, deviating from what is considered normal, good or true religion. Those who ›deviated from the norm‹ were often put in the position of having to defend themselves and their tradition, and this often proved to be an uphill battle. Sometimes people who were perceived as deviating from the norm were met with suspicion and interpellation: are they really committed to dialogue? Do they allow criticism of their tradition?

Interestingly, the delegitimization of some traditions helped others to reinforce their own religious identity as good, true, normal, tolerant, modern, … In other words, we are dealing with a simultaneous process of selfing (creating a sense of ›normal‹/normative/true religion) and othering (projecting abnormal/false religion onto others) based on religious difference. In my book I introduce the concept of religionization for this process of co-construction.

Significantly, in the Netherlands, and I assume in many Western European countries, normal – good, true – religion is personal, apolitical, ethical, spiritualised and interiorised. It is not too visible, too traditional, too doctrinal, too ritualistic, too material, and certainly not political. There is an implicit, sometimes explicit, claim that only religion understood in this way is capable of peace and in tune with modern values such as tolerance, critique and autonomy. It should come as no surprise that mostly (secularised) liberal Protestant Christians, representing the white Dutch

majority, claim to embody this norm (Wekker 2016). When members of the majority question religious practices that deviate from this ›idealised form of religion‹, they also question these individuals' sense of Dutch-ness. In the Netherlands, it is mostly, but not exclusively, Islam that is placed in the position of a potentially ›suspect tradition‹; even in a context of dialogue, prejudices surfaced and an attitude of questioning and suspicion sometimes took over, and Muslims were put on the spot.

While Islam is now being targeted as a (potentially) problematic religion, as a scholar specialising in the study of Christian-Jewish relations and the history of Christian anti-Judaism, some of the prejudices projected onto Islam sounded familiar and brought to mind typical anti-Semitic patterns of thought that associate Judaism with the letter of the law and Christianity with the spirit; I was also reminded of nineteenth-century antisemitic suspicions about Jews, especially regarding their ›ability‹ to assimilate and ›transform‹ Jewish tradition into a modern religion resembling Christianity (Judd 2011). But I was also reminded of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, with the latter being accused of superstition, magic and idolatry; an accusation that Catholics in a colonial context in turn projected onto indigenous people and their traditions. My students seemed to use a cultural archive consisting of ancient Christian theological vocabularies to draw boundaries between the self and the other, based on an imagined distinction between good and bad religion, true and false. But they knew nothing of the history of their ideas, treating them as common-sense knowledge about religion – the kind of knowledge that al l›normal‹ – rational, modern people share or should share. Historical amnesia – a certain forgetfulness – reinforces ideas about religious normality at the expense of those who deviate from it. This book seeks to change that.

In this book, drawing on my experience as an interfaith scholar and educator, I have sought to destabilise or denaturalise the seemingly taken-for-granted notions of good and bad religion by uncovering the historical forces that have shaped these perceptions. The categories of ›good‹ and ›bad‹, ›true‹ and ›false‹, or ›normal‹ and ›abnormal‹ religion may seem natural or common sense, but they have been constructed over time through specific cultural, theological and political processes that reinforce unequal power relations. My starting point was that these religionized binaries are largely Christian-made, emerging from centuries of Christian theological thought. By historicising these binaries, as I do in the book, we can bring to the surface the Christian theological legacies that inform our modern understanding of what constitutes ›good‹ and ›bad‹ religion and challenge its naturalness.

By revealing these entangled historical processes of the ›making of Christianity's others‹, I make visible otherwise invisible norms that shape our understanding of religion today, even in the context of interreligious dialogue. These norms, often operating below the surface, establish hierarchies of religious legitimacy without us being fully aware of them. Only by uncovering their historical roots can we begin to critically evaluate and challenge them. It is my hope that this work of exposure will help to create a more level playing field for those who believe and practice differently. Indeed, I hope that it will open up new possibilities for understanding religion in a more nuanced and less hierarchical way, allowing us to see that contemporary ideas about religion

are not neutral or objective, but are deeply informed by a legacy of Christian theological boundary-making.

In order to understand how the cultural archive of religionized images developed in the context of Western Christian Europe, my book takes a broad view. It applies the concept of religionization to the histories of classification and stratification that preceded modern expressions of religionization such as religio-secularisation, religio-racialisation and the seemingly more benign world religions paradigm. Rather than being a disruption of the past, these modern expressions of religionization build on, adopt and adapt older patterns of religionization dating back to the very first centuries of Christianity and Latin Christendom.

Taking a longue durée approach, I trace how Christians from the very beginning created religionized categories – such as ›the Jew‹, ›the heretic‹ and ›the pagan‹ – and how these categories materialised over time. I begin by examining early Christianity in the Roman Empire, where these key religionized categories first took shape and profoundly influenced how Christians in Western Europe configured their own identity and that of their religious ›others‹ (Part 1). From there, I turn to Latin Christendom (Part 2), before exploring how the ›splintering‹ of religion during the Long Reformation gave rise to new processes of religionization (Part 3). Throughout this journey, I focus on questions such as what constituted the Christian religious norm in different historical, cultural and socio-political contexts. How was this norm continually redefined by projecting ideas of false, bad or problematic religion onto those labelled as Christianity's ›others‹? And how did these boundaries reinforce social stratification? What disciplinary mechanisms were developed to bring ›apostates‹ into the fold or to ›protect‹ the Christian body from outsiders?

Towards the end of the book, I also consider the so-called ›dialogical turn‹, asking whether the promotion of interreligious dialogue, which began in the late nineteenth century and gained momentum in the twentieth, has succeeded in disrupting these entrenched patterns of religionization. Or is dialogue itself in danger of perpetuating these very structures? What constructs of true, good and bad religion shape the lofty ideals of dialogue, and to what extent do they limit its critical potential? Ultimately, my aim is to ask how much of the past persists in the present, and to explore whether the legacy of religionized thinking still influences contemporary interreligious discourse.

2. From Comparative Hermeneutics to Relational Hermeneutics

Slabodsky reads my book in terms of a shift or transition from a comparative approach to a relational hermeneutics that offers a new theoretical framework for understanding religious and racialised others. According to Slabodsky, traditional comparative frameworks tend to »juxtapose groups along parallel lines« and »fail to capture the complex ways in which discourses of otherness are intertwined«. This approach often produces analyses that isolate experiences and

reproduce divisions, ignoring how different groups have been mutually constituted through overlapping structures of power. In contrast, my book, like the work of Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (2014), is »not interested in comparing isolated categories, but in revealing how constructions of otherness function in a relational matrix«.

This relational hermeneutic shows that Christian imaginings of others – whether ›Jews‹, ›Muslims‹, ›pagans‹, or ›heretics‹ – have always been entangled and co-constructed within broader European projects of self-definition and colonial expansion. Indeed, the »invention of the Jew as a figure of theological and racial suspicion became paradigmatic«, influencing European constructions of Muslims, heretics and pagans. Similarly, the problem of idolatry, which during the Long Reformation defined intra-Christian anxieties about true worship, »migrated into the colonial imaginary« and was later »weaponized against Indigenous peoples« in the Americas. A complex web of intertwined categories moved back and forth between Europe and its colonies, shaping interactions between Christians and imagined ›non-Christians‹. As Slabodsky observes, »the colonial tools used to construct the Jewish, Muslim, or Indigenous ›problem‹ in one context are reapplied and reconfigured across regions and eras«. The legacies of colonial imaginaries and disciplinary mechanisms have produced a globalised matrix of power that continues to shape contemporary attitudes towards religious and racialised others.

Slabodsky goes on to note that the relational hermeneutics developed in my book exposes the limitations of »comparative frameworks that treat each group's suffering as unique«, suggesting that this model often inadvertently reinforces isolation. In his reading, and going beyond my book, this relational hermeneutics allows for the possibility of »intersectional alliances« by showing that »what is said about one group is related to the problems projected onto others«. This recognition of interconnected oppressions has a profound ethical and political dimension: if these groups are linked by common mechanisms of control, they can also find common ground in common mechanisms of resistance. If »the struggle against one form of marginalization is inherently linked to the struggle against others«, transnational, decolonial solidarity and coalitions become not only desirable but necessary. Such alliances can then focus on resisting ongoing colonial legacies that continue to produce hierarchies and exclusions today.

By moving beyond mere comparison, he suggests, my book offers a profound methodological and ethical intervention. It not only reorients how we understand the historical construction of religious others, but also transforms how we think about solidarity and resistance in a world still shaped by the intertwined legacies of colonial and religious hegemonies. This approach, as Slabodsky suggests, is not about erasing differences, but about revealing the relational networks of power that bind different forms of marginalisation together – and in doing so, liberating new forms of collective resistance.

Building on these ideas, I am currently working on a joint research project with Michelle Voss, a decolonial feminist comparative theologian, on developing a critical interreligious pedagogy that starts from relational hermeneutics. I suggest that starting from my work on religionization and linking Slabodsky's relational hermeneutics with the idea of decolonial solidarity, we can make a profound contribution to a critical approach to interreligious dialogue that reckons with unequal

power relations, hegemonic structures and intertwined legacies of marginalisation that are often overlooked in conventional dialogue settings. From this perspective, interreligious dialogue is not simply about understanding theological differences, but about addressing shared histories of marginalisation and how these histories continue to shape contemporary interfaith dynamics. In this way, interreligious dialogue has the potential of becoming a space in which religionized and racialized others can co-create practices of resistance and solidarity in the face of shared histories of domination. This also relates to Hannah Visser's contribution.

3. Towards a Critical Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

Hannah Visser, with whom I share an interest in interreligious pedagogy, is also concerned about unequal power relations between those who believe and practice differently. Drawing on my book, she suggests that the construction of the ideal of dialogical religion as the good/true religion goes hand in hand with the projection of non-dialogical religion onto the others of secularised Christian Europe. Moreover, she suggests that the very idea of creating a safe space – so central to many theories of dialogue – is implicated in perpetuating religionization. I quote at length:

> the way interfaith programs are organized, focusing on safe – i. e., rational, conflict-free, individualized – spaces poses a risk. This risk involves overlooking Christian biases and privileges, historical roots of current dynamics, colonial legacies, and social-political contexts. As interfaith dialogue looks at a hopeful future, not at the »violent past,« it pleads that the interfaith space be free from critical reflection and deconstruction of existing inequalities. At the same time, it categorizes those who choose not to participate as problematic, although the dynamics described are perfectly understandable reasons not to. Safe spaces can thus be seen as a symbol of these patterns.

Indeed, pedagogies that focus on sharing personal stories without systematic power analysis end up validating the status quo: marginalised communities suffer the most from such interpretive personal approaches (Arao/Clemens 2013; Leonardo/Porter 2010). Using the conceptual lens of religionization, Visser asks how interreligious educators can move beyond the idea of a safe space. Taking a social justice or critical approach to interreligious dialogue, Visser plays with concepts such as ›a brave space‹, ›a classroom of disagreement‹ or ›a pedagogy of discomfort‹ to suggest that educators should ›learn about histories of oppression and examine how power is embedded in interreligious interactions, rather than shying away from conflict and controversial issues‹. I agree with Visser that enhancing the critical potential of interreligious education requires deconstructing the category of ›normal‹ religion. This involves uncovering, examining and challenging the normative assumptions about religion – what it is and what it should be – that are embedded in the socio-political imagination of Western liberal democracies. It is crucial to highlight how these assumptions privilege some while marginalising others. We need to ask: where does the discourse of ›normal‹ religion come from? Who has the power to define this norm? And whose religious practices are delegitimised in the process?

Religious educators committed to critical interfaith pedagogy should encourage students to engage with dominant discourses about religion, religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. This

includes examining whether they perpetuate patterns of ›religionization‹ – the process of defining and categorising religion in ways that contribute to the othering of some students.

More specifically, educators might trace the genealogy of the world religions paradigm and ask students to consider the extent to which it relies on faith-centred, text-based understandings of religion. They might also ask whether ritual or material practices are negatively associated with superstition. In addition, the religious-secular divide, with its underlying normative assumptions about ›good‹ and ›bad‹ religion, should be questioned. By raising awareness of how religionized difference has historically been used to marginalise others, interreligious educators could equip students with the tools to analyse whether religious othering persists today, how they may contribute to it, and how they can work together for change. Ultimately, transforming inequality begins with recognising and challenging entangled histories of oppression. By developing this awareness, educators and students can actively participate in creating a more just and inclusive interfaith dialogue.

4. Religionization and the ›Problem‹ of Islam

In her contribution, Amina Nawaz, a scholar of religious history, zooms in on a particular case study that I also discuss in my book, that of medieval and early modern Spain. While I focus mainly on the ways in which Jews and Jewish conversos were confronted with religious otherness in their homeland, ultimately leading to their expulsion in 1492, Nawaz asks what happened to the remaining Muslim communities who called Spain home. Nawaz's scholarship takes a particular interest in the Moriscos, Muslim converts to Catholicism, many of whom »continued to practice Islam throughout the sixteenth century«. While the sources show us how much they were ›active participants in the devotional worlds in which they lived‹, from the perspective of the emerging idea of a ›Catholic Spanish nation‹, these Moriscos were a ›problem‹; they were projected as an alien body, a threat to the ideal of Catholic Spanish identity. More than a century after the expulsion of the Jews, between 1609 and 1614, Muslims were also forcibly expelled from Spain. Conversos – whether Jewish or Muslim – were still suspected of holding on to their old ways.

Nawaz returns to the history of Muslim communities and how they were projected as the other in Catholic Spain in order to better understand the fate of Muslims in Europe today. While she readily admits that Muslims in Europe today are in a much better position than in the past, no longer being forcibly converted and largely able to practice their faith openly, echoes of the past remain.

As in early modern Spain, the focus is often on Muslim women and their bodies, with contemporary regulations – such as France's restrictions on Muslim women's clothing – mirroring historical efforts to control and ›enlighten‹ Muslims, especially women. Without losing sight of historical and contextual particularities, we can see parallels between then and now, between the fate of Muslims and that of Jews, between the Spanish Inquisition and the religio-racialised Inquisition Muslims face today: always at risk of »being accused of ›hiding‹ [their] political ideas under a religious ›cover‹« (Jansen and van der Steen 2024). Nawaz exemplifies the work that I hope my book will

inspire: seeing the presence of the past and shifting the gaze from Jews and Muslims as question or problem to inquiring into the (secularised) Christian theological discourses that made Jews and Muslims a question or problem.

Understanding the role of Christianity in the process of racialisation in the late Middle Ages and early modern period also allows us to challenge the dominant idea that Islamophobia is not a form of racialisation because it targets Muslims because of their faith rather than their ›nature‹ (biology/physiognomy). My book highlights the point made by scholars such as Heng (2018b) and Stoler (2016), who show that race has never been just about biology. Racialisation has also always manifested itself through cultural, social and religious forms. In the period Nawaz discusses, religion (read Christianity), ›the supreme source of authority‹ […] could operate both socio-culturally and biopolitically: subjecting peoples of hated faith, for example, to a political theology that could biologise, define and essentialise an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an intertwined cluster of ways« (Heng 2018a: 3). This insight is important not only to shift our thinking about the past, but also because this new understanding of the entanglement of religion and race helps us to better understand the present. Indeed, by emphasising the continuity of the past within the present, I push against the division of racisms – separating medieval religio-racialisation from modern racism – and highlight how race often presents itself as religion (Jansen/Meer 2020). The claim that Islamophobia isn't racism because it targets religion needs to be reconsidered in light of the historical entanglement between race and religion that my book explores.

5. Comparative Philology and Religionization

Diane Lipton is intrigued by my chapter on comparative philology. In the 18th and 19th centuries, comparative philologists developed new religio-racialized taxonomies of languages and people. This chapter really underscores the point I was trying to make in relation to Nawaz' contribution: race can take many forms and expressions: sometimes race battens »on bodies, physiognomy, and somatic attributes such as skin color in one location; perhaps on social practices, religion, and culture in another; and with perhaps a multiplicity of interlocking discourses elsewhere« (Heng 2018: 3).

The chapter to which Lipton reacts deals with the project of comparative philology, according to which language became the primary criterion to categorize people, to determine their nature and to establish genealogies and kinship relations between them (Harpham 2009: 44). Similarities between languages pointed in the direction of a common lineage, whereas the absence of similarities signified that there was no kinship between the people in question. This philological project also intersected with the project of scientific racism. Reading, analysing, and comparing literary documents from all over the globe, comparative philologists constructed, crafted, created, and essentialized peoples/races as distinct from or akin to other peoples/races based on linguistic differences and/or similarities. Philological scientists invented new categories, drew and redrew boundaries between people, and rewrote the histories of people. This is why Edward Said once

stated that nineteenth-century European processes of mapping and remapping the world were happening in the ›workplace‹ of the philologist (Said 2003).

Drawing heavily on the division between Aryan (or Indo-European) and Semitic languages, 18th- and 19th-century scholars used linguistic genealogical taxonomies to support European claims of cultural and racial superiority. Following the pioneering work of Said (2003), Olender (1992) and Masuzawa (2005), I have focused on this period and the work of comparative philologists because it lays the foundation for the so-called world religions paradigm. Furthermore, this period once again demonstrates the interconnectedness of religion, race and, in this case, language as co-constructed categories of power. People and their religions – were racialized based on their language affiliation – Semitic and Aryan.

Lipton shows the persistence of biblical-theological frameworks in the work of so-called ›secular science‹ of comparative philology. Scholars such as Linnaeus and others indeed maintained religionized modes of thought even as they moved away from direct biblical references. She shows how these so-called ›modern‹ and secular scholars continued to be influenced by biblical genealogies, especially those in Genesis. For example, the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible illustrates an early theological explanation for the origins of linguistic diversity, which philologists later reinterpreted in secular terms. Thus, Lipton underscores the point also made by critical race philosopher Anya Topolski, who states that although comparative philologists

> claimed to be scientific and free from theological influence, these new philological categories incorporated the previous ›religious‹ categories. Perhaps the best-known example are two nineteenth-century terms used by philologists, ›Semitic‹ and ›Aryan‹, which later provided the racial categories used by the Nazis. While the Nazis replaced philological justifications with pseudo-biological ones, the philological terms are the bridge between the ›religious‹ and biological categories (Topolski 2018: 65).

If critical whiteness scholars make visible the invisible norm of whiteness, and critical secularism scholars reveal how the modern secular state is »deeply implicated in a particular (Christian) political theology« (Laborde 2014: 693), then it is time to expose the Christian theological legacies that have shaped Europe's religioracialised world (Jennings 2010). This would require critical christianity studies, in line with the important work done by such scholars like Sigrid Rettenbacher (2019), Judith Gruber (Gruber 2022), Rachel Heath (Heath 2023), Mara Brecht (Brecht 2018), Michelle Voss (Voss 2023) and John Thatamanil (Thatamanil 2020) who are weaving together postcolonial approaches and interreligious studies. One way of reading my book is as providing the basis for such critical christianity studies.

6. Religionizing Islamic Theology

My work on religionization provides Gallien with a critical lens through which to examine how Islamic theology is misrepresented in Western academia by being reshaped to fit Christian theological frameworks. When studied in Western universities, Islamic theology is often categorised under Islamic studies (as a cultural phenomenon) or theology (as speculative theology), both of which limit its broader theological scope. Using the concept of religionization, Gallien critiques this

reduction through a case study of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Dīwān, showing how Western scholarship often emphasizes kalām (speculative theology) while neglecting other theological traditions such as mysticism. By interpreting Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry as theology, Gallien shows that Islamic theological reflection is much broader and richer than is usually acknowledged. It is an impoverishment that does not do justice to Islamic theology to force it into a secularised Christian theological mould.

In my view, this problem extends beyond the inclusion of Islamic theology to other ›non-Christian‹ traditions, such as Jewish studies, Buddhology and Hindu theology, which are subject to similar distortions when fitted into Christian academic moulds. As Christian theological faculties in Western academia pluralise, we need to ask critically (Weiße 2020): What are the criteria for ›academic‹ theology? Which tradition sets the standard? Which arguments are considered credible, which voices are highlighted, and which sources are researched?

The making of theology, of proper theology, of academic theology, could be seen as a continuation of the work of religionization, which revolves not only around defining what religion should be like, but also how religion should be studied in line with modernity and academic demands. That these demands often and in complex ways reinforce secular Christian normativity and lead to distortions of other theological traditions should be explored further. The question is how to avoid subsuming different expressions of theology under a single religionized standard.

7. Religionization and Gender

Religionization is not a stand-alone process; it intersects with ethnicization, racialization, gendering and sexualization. These terms refer to processes of selfing (constructing a normative identity) and othering (creating a deviant, illegitimate other) that create hierarchies between majority and minority groups. Critical scholars note that race, ethnicity and gender are socially ascribed, assigning norms and roles to groups. People are categorised and treated on the basis of their racialised, gendered or ethnicised identity, shaping social relations in personal, work and political contexts. Moreover, religionization, gendering, ethnicization and racialization intersect and reinforce each other. Religious opponents are often sexualised and racialised, and sometimes even dehumanised (Knust 2006; Drake 2013).

Zimmerman's essay builds on the concept of religionization, which shows how Christianity was constructed through processes of othering. Significantly, she brings gender into focus and extends this analysis by exploring how women were not only externalised but also marginalised within the Christian tradition itself. By othering women, a male-centered Christian norm emerged.

She presents three historical flashpoints in Christianity, focusing on the male gaze of the theologians Jerome, John Meyer and Pius XI. These figures illustrate how womanhood and femininity were constructed as the other of a male-dominated understanding of Christianity. Jerome, drawing on ancient misogynist thought, directly associated heresy with femininity. John Meyer saw female monastic communities as gateways to impure behaviour, contrasting them with the male ideal of Christian purity. Pius XI saw women as particularly vulnerable to modern influences such

as emancipation, claiming that true belonging to the Christian community was a privilege that few women deserved.

Zimmerman's essay further highlights how the male-centred Christian church developed strategies to control and contain femininity within the Christian sphere. This was done through repressive control – assigning rigid roles and spaces for women – and through glorification, creating idealised but unattainable female figures. These strategies aimed to manage the perceived threat of femininity while reinforcing male dominance within Christianity.

Exploring the gendered aspects of religionization alongside the representation of heretics, Jews, Muslims and pagans opens up complex questions. Key areas of inquiry include the intersection of gender and religionization, examining how religious others were gendered and imagined as 'weak women' and how their portrayal reinforced patriarchal Christian norms. This also invites further reflection on the mechanisms of control and subordination used by religious authorities to maintain the boundaries of ›true‹ Christianity. Zimmerman's essay shows how some of the mechanisms used to control the problem of the religionized other – Muslims, Jews and heretics – were also applied to women. I am thinking in particular of separation, subordination, containment and isolation. In doing so, she also further nuances and complexifies the idea of Christian normativity, highlighting that what we are really talking about is cisgender male (and, I would add, white) Christianity. Zimmerman's analysis should also be included in a critical approach to interreligious dialogue, which should always assume an intersectional power analysis.

Zimmerman's essay has sparked my interest in exploring further the intersection between religionization and gender. I would be particularly interested in exploring whether witches can be recognised as an additional religionized category, similar to Jews, Muslims, pagans and heretics, and perhaps intertwined and related to these different religionized categories (Moore 2007).

8. Patterns of Religionization: From Othering to Samenessing?

It is true that each chapter, or rather each period, deserves a book in its own right, written by specialists such as Thomas Jürgasch, a scholar from whom I learned so much during my stay in Tübingen. I am grateful for his response, because it gives us another opportunity to continue our conversation. Jürgasch specialises in early Christianity, the focus of the first part of my book. Like me, he is deeply interested in how the apologists (2nd-3rd century AD) tried to »justify and defend [Christianness] against the pagan Romans, as it appeared to be a suspicious and logically absurd religious path«. In his contribution, he asks whether I have perhaps focused too much on religionization in terms of othering; he asks whether we should not also consider religionization in terms of ›samenessing‹.

In my book I focus on processes of religionized selfing and othering – how the construction of a genuine Christian identity is linked to the misconstrual of religious others. I distinguish two logics of religionization. The first is dichotomisation, where the religious other is the opposite of the self. Traditions such as *adversus nationes* (against the nations), *adversus haereses* (against heretics) and *adversus Iudaeos* (against the Jews) contrast ›true‹ Christianity with ›superstition‹, ›heresy‹ and ›Jewishness‹. These others – pagan, heretic and Jew – are used to define true Christianity. The second logic is that of inclusion, where the other is seen as an inferior version of the self. This logic creates overlaps between Christians and non-Christians, while reinforcing Christian superiority. It assumes a hierarchy of knowledge in which Christian truth is fulfilled and others remain at lower levels, unaware that they are subsumed within Christian universality.

Jürgasch suggests that there may be another logic that I have not considered, especially in the period of early Christianity when Christians were still a minority. He identifies a pattern that he calls samenessing (rather than othering), which emphasises that Christians are not different from non-Christian pagans, but rather quite similar. Jürgasch does not address how this logic of sameness relates specifically to the logic of encompassment, which also recognises overlap and continuity between Christians and non-Christian pagans, but in my view the two are distinct. Indeed, while the logic of inclusion seeks to incorporate non-Christian pagans and their worship into a Christian narrative, the logic of sameness seeks rather to incorporate Christians into the Roman world, making an argument for their civic status. I quote Jürgash here at length:

> 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.

He goes on to draw our attention to the precise audience of apologetic expressions of samenessing:

> 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.

After reading Jürgasch's contribution, a question comes to mind: If we limit the concept of religionization to the construction of a sense of true, proper religion by simultaneously defining and projecting deviant religion onto others (in this case, non-Christians), to what extent is the process of »samenessing« actually an expression of religionization? One could argue that the scope of religionization should be broadened to include samenessing, and that religionization should be understood as the construction of true religion *in relation* to significant others without necessarily implying othering. Even if we would follow this lead, I still wonder whether the logic of samenessing which Jürgasch describes is an expression of religionization.

It seems that the apologists who engaged in samenessing were more concerned with proving that Christians were good Roman citizens than with arguing for the truth of their religion. Although

Christians were reluctant to participate in Roman cult practices (though some did), their aim was to show that their religion did not prevent them from being loyal citizens and that they should not be seen as a threat to the *Pax Romana*. Rather, their argument was to show that Christianity was not an alien or disruptive element in Roman society, but rather an integral part of it, which should exempt them from marginalisation or persecution. Should this really be seen as an expression of religionization, in the sense of the construction of a true religion? I'm not sure of the answer, but I raise the question and would like to discuss it further with Jürgasch.

I fully agree, however, with another point Jürgasch makes: that religionized constructs are imaginary and that the complexities of social reality go far beyond simplistic notions of bounded identity. Religious identity is not fixed or isolated; it is deeply intertwined with other aspects of a person's identity, such as their social, political or cultural identity. Modern processes of religionization have normalised the idea that religion is a distinct, separate and bounded aspect of identity, often seen in conflict with other forms of belonging. This reflects a socially constructed, modern understanding of religion as apolitical, personal and faith-based (Nongbri 2013). I interpret Jürgasch's response – although he does not say so explicitly – as a warning to scholars not to project this modern understanding of religion into the past, particularly into the world of late antiquity. But his response is even more profound and also pertains to the present. Indeed, he challenges the very notion that religious identity is always in conflict with other forms of belonging. His historical case studies show how individuals often embraced multiple identities without perceiving contradictions. For example, a third-century Roman Christian woman could have attended the games without feeling that it threatened her Christian beliefs, and an Islamic caliph could have visited a Christian shrine without feeling that his Muslim identity was compromised.

These examples show that religious people can navigate multiple identities – cultural, national or social – without seeing them as conflicting with their religious beliefs. By understanding that religious identity, like other aspects of human identity, is flexible and situational, we can also better address the complexities of belonging in plural societies. Moving to the present, this perspective encourages empathy and a more inclusive view of minorities, where they are not simply »the other« but share overlapping identities and concerns with the majority. In a polarising context, acknowledging this complexity can help to reduce hostility and open up space for coexistence.

9. Comparative theology in view of religionization

In her contribution, Elisabeth Migge considers the significance of my book for the field of comparative theology, a specific theological approach that aims to overcome and correct the Christian tendency to ›craft‹ religious others into rhetorical or hermeneutical figures in order to strengthen Christian self-understanding (Cornille 2020). My systematic-historical analysis has shown that while religionized categories and taxonomies are volatile and malleable, many of their underlying normative assumptions persist and continue to shape our perceptions of religious otherness. Reading my book has given Migge a profound awareness of how resilient patterns of religionization are.

In the light of my book, Migge rightly asks to what extent comparative theology – a specific form of ›interreligious dialogical theology‹ that revolves around deep theological learning across traditions – runs the risk of inadvertently replicating religionization and the unequal power relations that go with it. Could it be that comparative theologians are not sufficiently attentive to the ways in which the history of religionization affects their constructive work of comparative theological rectification? Although comparative theology is dedicated to rectifying and restoring relations, those who do this work are shaped by our traditions, socio-political contexts and dominant ideas. They operate within existing interpretive frameworks, working from normative assumptions and using seemingly self-evident categories that may be implicated in the work of religionization. As Migge rightly points out, despite our best intentions, comparative theologians may often be unaware of how these traditions, categories and ideas contribute to the work of othering. Simply declaring ourselves open to learning from others and being interrupted by their insights may not be enough to move beyond hegemonic patterns of thought.

Addressing this problem requires tracing the genealogy of the ideas and normative assumptions that live in 'our' collective social imagination, especially as they relate to religious difference. This involves understanding both the systemic mechanisms of religious selfing and othering, and the historical-cultural images of self and other that have emerged from these processes. How have our collective prejudicial images of self and other been constructed in the past, and how do they continue to influence our encounters with people of other faiths today? How do the categories and conceptual frameworks we often take for granted inadvertently perpetuate religionization? These are the critical questions we need to address in order to move forward in the field of comparative theology.

The question I still struggle with as a comparative theologian after writing my book is of a different nature; it is the question whether it will ever be possible to ›liberate‹ the Christian tradition from the problem religionization. How can we think about this problem without falling into a kind of idealistic reading of history that projects a pure, untainted version of Christianity to which we can return – while ignoring or minimising the pain and trauma inflicted on Christianity's others throughout history? How do we avoid imagining a pristine Christianity that erases the historical realities of oppression, exclusion and the deep wounds caused by religionization? Is it even possible to ›purify‹ the Christian tradition from the entanglements of religionization without overlooking the violence and harm embedded in that history? Or is the very idea of ›purifying‹ the Christian tradition itself problematic, given the structural nature of the damage it has caused? How do we write about the salvific potential of Christian faith in a world wounded by its legacy?

10. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to reiterate my heartfelt thanks to the organisers and contributors to this symposium. It has been an honour to have my work engaged with in such a thoughtful way, and I hope that this marks the beginning of a much longer and sustained scholarly conversation. The issues raised today not only enrich the discussion of religionization, but also open up new avenues for further research, reflection and critique.

I sincerely hope that the conceptual lens of religionization will continue to inspire future research projects, particularly those that explore the complex entanglements of race and religion. There is a wealth of potential for studies that adopt a longue durée perspective, linking the past with the present in ways that highlight the continuity of religionized thinking and its modern implications. At the same time, I hope that scholars will also embrace microhistories that explore how religionization plays out locally and contextually, shedding light on the nuances of these processes in specific communities and regions.

Furthermore, I hope that the development of a relational hermeneutics, as opposed to a comparative hermeneutics, will gain traction in academic discussions, particularly with a focus on the intertwined categories of identity and difference. Such a hermeneutical approach has the potential to challenge and transform the way we think about both comparative theology and interreligious dialogue. By moving beyond isolated comparisons and recognising the deep interconnections between religious, racial and gender categories, we can facilitate the emergence of new, decolonial forms of solidarity. These efforts could create spaces for dialogue that do more than simply acknowledge difference – they could actively work to dismantle the historical power imbalances that have long shaped interfaith relations.

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