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Mobilizing Theory

Concluding Thoughts

Birgit Meyer

The contributions to this volume trace the itineraries of people on the move, fleeing from defunct states, religious persecution, war-torn environments, or poverty-stricken conditions and aspiring to enter Europe, with more or less success. Its focus is on people who not only traverse rough territories and borders and a host of institutions on the way but also move through different statuses—traveler, migrant, refugee, immigrant, citizen—that entail different rights and possibilities. Many flee from unbearable conditions, and the trajectory is long—with people getting stuck on the way—and once arrived in Europe, gaining asylum is a complicated legal-bureaucratic procedure. Religion plays a role throughout these trajectories, in multiple ways. While our title profiles the term “refugee,” we do not use it to designate exclusively those who finally gain that legal status after a long trajectory, with lengthy periods of waiting in many places, including European refugee camps. We employ the term as a lens to investigate the complex itineraries of displaced people who seek to achieve that status, whether they eventually may be found to qualify for asylum or not. In so doing, we are careful to avoid framing refugees as “simply dispossessed, traumatized, and helpless victims” (Ninh; see also Horstmann and Jung 2015b: 2–5).

Throughout their itineraries, religion plays important but often overlooked roles, and one of the central aims of this volume is to explore these roles in ways that lead beyond well-trodden stereotypes about religion in modern, secular society. This neglect of religion in relation to the study of refugee issues is not simply an empirical problem, but also a conceptual one. It stems from the secularist approach in mainstream social and cultural science discourses, according to which religion, understood in terms of private belief, is marginal, as is also argued by three recent companion volumes on the theme of refugees and religion in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis that began in 2015 (Horstmann

and Jung 2015b; Mavelli and Wilson 2017; Schmiedel and Smith 2018). By and large, our volume joins the conceptual critiques ventured by these works (with Mavelli and Wilson problematizing the secular-religious binary and Schmiedel and Smith identifying competing (political) theologies in relation to the arrival of refugees). Its distinct contribution lies in its anthropological approach to people on the move from Vietnam (Part II), from Africa (Part III), and to spaces of reception (Part IV).¹ It seeks to situate their arrival and accommodation in a historical perspective by retrieving from oblivion Europe's long history of accommodating refugees and migrants (Part I) and by exploring the conditions under which and ways in which refugees from Vietnam were received and settled in Europe during the Cold War. Each contribution offers specific, often dismaying insights into particular aspects of the huge phenomenon of people on the move to and within Europe and around the globe. Taken together, they help us chart the complex historical developments and global entanglements within which the current "refugee crisis" is occurring. Taking the refugees-and-religion nexus as a focal point reveals a lot about the legal, political, and symbolic operations through which nation-states, and the EU at large, seek to retain their boundaries and regulate the role and place of religion in society, in a world in motion. This concluding chapter addresses four themes: the problematic diagnostics implied in the term "crisis," state politics of religious plurality, religion as a boundary-transgressing force, and, by way of conclusion, the need to *mobilize* theory.

Beyond "Crisis"

The framing of the arrival of more than a million people at Europe's increasingly guarded borders in 2015 as a "refugee crisis"—or, to indicate that not all would be eligible to gain asylum: "migrant crisis"²—does not refer primarily to the critical situation of these people as such, but above all to the problem Europe has with their presence. It is a *European* "crisis" about refugees (see also Schmiedel and Smith 2018: 4)—a situation in which politicians and policymakers fail to offer refugees decent and fair treatment as required by international law and the UNHCR. As Morgenstern, Lynes, and Paul put it poignantly:

the unspoken object of "crisis" in the formation "migrant crisis" was and always has been *Europe*, imagined as a site of right action and just governance, and never the migrant as such; (. . .) the legislative and geopolitical maneuvers taken under the auspices of "responding to the migrant crisis" since 2015 had been less about rescuing the migrant in peril, and more about rescuing the *idea of Europe*

from this same migrant, about restoring a vision of territorial governance and administrative right-headedness that had been imperiled *by* the arrival of the migrant to European shores. (2020: 28)

Zygmunt Bauman (2016) expressed his dismay that in Europe, with its tradition of Enlightenment, the Kantian principle of mutual hospitality, and the ideal of democracy and citizenship, there is a growing open hostility toward strangers in general and refugees in particular. The rise of identitarian xenophobic sentiments, which have long been dormant since the Second World War but gained momentum across Europe since 2015, makes it difficult for European national governments to live up to their stated commitment to the 1951 Geneva Convention that codified the rights of refugees and was made universally applicable by the 1967 protocol. Across Europe, citizens have stood up to push their governments to give shelter to refugees and to accommodate migrants. Engaging in all sorts of humanitarian aid (many grounded in Christian faith, see Barbato 2017; Carrière 2017; Valenta 2018), they criticize that the values that have long served as a marker of distinction for Europe's enlightened status and that legitimized its role as a vanguard of liberal democracy and human rights in the world are being jettisoned by depriving other human beings of their humanity. This is shown glaringly by the catastrophic situation in refugee camps in Greece, Turkey, and Libya and by the passage over the Mediterranean Sea—since 2014, more than 30,000 people have drowned.³ In this sense, Europe—as the presumed embodiment of human rights—certainly is in a crisis.

While I recognize the gap between legal obligations toward refugees and their actual treatment, and while I share the sense of a crisis of humanitarianism and the imminent danger of squandering ethical values, as a scholar, I find it problematic to conceptualize the current situation as a crisis. Far from being neutral, the term “crisis” has been employed as a long-standing rhetorical figure to diagnose a particular situation as dangerous. As part of the “structural signature of modernity,” the concept of crisis enshrines multiple, long-standing layers of meaning, including legal, medical, and theological ones (Koselleck 2006, orig. 1970). The framing of a particular situation as a crisis signals that the situation is at a critical turning point at which a legal-political decision must be taken or it is likened to a dangerous disease approaching its tipping point—life or death—or even that it is on the verge of the apocalypse that signals the end of the known world. Koselleck summarizes:

The legal, theological, and medical usage of “crisis” thus contains discipline-bound, specific meanings. Taken together, however, they could—in different

ways—be incorporated into modern social and political language. At all times the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death. (Koselleck 2006: 361)

Though Koselleck wrote his impressive history of the concept of crisis fifty years ago, his essay is still of great help in understanding how deeply this multidimensional concept of crisis shapes contemporary discourses about refugees. The political use of the term “crisis” connotes a view of Europe as a sick body that is threatened with invasion by strangers and even raises apocalyptic ideas about the pending downfall of the Occident. Having gained prominence through the political theologies of far-right populist groups like PEGIDA (e.g., Schmiedel 2018: 211–17; Polak 2018: 244), such views now resonate in broader society. The use of the term “crisis” involves a diagnostic act that may legitimate huge political consequences and evokes moods that are difficult to control. Heeding Koselleck’s advice “for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology” (ibid.: 399), I think that the term “crisis” is of little analytical value for grasping the current stakes in the accommodation of refugees. I agree with Janet Roitman that “crisis is the unexamined point of departure for narration. It is a blind spot for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance and about what constitutes social or historical meaning” (2014: 66).⁴ Exactly for this reason, its use itself and the way it produces a particular past and future is to be analyzed. Needed is a critical exploration of the diagnostics and prognostics that accompany the use of the term “crisis” as a form of governance (see also Wilson and Mavelli 2017: 9).

Ironically, in March 2019, the European Commission declared the end of the “migration crisis of 2015,” largely as a consequence of the “Turkey deal” in March 2016 (Morgenstern, Lynes and Paul 2020: 27), even though people are still dying in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea, go through terrible hardships in fleeing from Syria, and are kept in deplorable camps at Europe’s borders or in Libya. In the meantime, we find ourselves in the midst of the “Corona crisis.” Public concerns have turned to the vulnerability of the separate nation-states within the EU, while the fact that the virus also hits people in overcrowded refugee camps is barely noted. There is a remarkable homology here between the framing of the arrival of refugees and migrants in 2015 and the current corona pandemic as crisis: in both cases, there is an image of Europe and its member states as potential patients that might be afflicted by outside intruders, with the states claiming the authority to protect and sanitize these endangered bodies of the nation. Both “crises” take recourse to the same mix of medical and political-

theological vocabularies, through which political entities become naturalized and elevated to a higher purpose.⁵ Clearly, the use of the concept of crisis as a frame provides a powerful narrative to insist on the need for immediate action—and even a state of emergency—in a situation of life and death, to cure or even save the body politic.⁶

This body politic is imagined to have retained its purity through the protection of its boundaries. As stressed by Peter van der Veer in the Introduction, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966) affords fundamental insights into the transfiguration of the imagined community of the nation into a naturalized entity. Her idea of the body as “a model which can stand for any bounded system” (1966: 115) and the associated notions of purity, dirt, and danger are indispensable for a critical deconstruction of the crisis framing and can help us grasp the mobilization of powerful narratives for the sake of closures and exclusions. While “purity and danger are the main elements of a symbolic repertoire that one finds in a wide range of ritual purifications at the individual and group level” (Van der Veer, Introduction), including in religious and ethnic minorities, it is clear that nation-states have the power to turn their symbolic repertoires into political realities and binding orders. While the focus of our volume is on contemporary European nation-states—especially Germany—that receive rather than produce refugees, we are certainly aware that the power of states to purify the nation has caused and still causes the displacement of huge numbers of people. Some of these refugees may eventually apply for asylum in the West, while many remain stuck in semipermanent regional camps, as the chapter by Salah Punathil on experiences of violence and persecution of Muslims in Assam, India, shows in an exemplary manner.

Another problem of the crisis framing, along with the rhetorical invocation of the body politic as threatened, is the sense of exceptionality and extraordinariness that accompanies it. This may condone historical amnesia, making it seem as if the refugee issue were a recent phenomenon in the wake of globalization. This volume, especially Part I, works against this forgetfulness. As Van der Veer points out, already in the aftermath of the Reformation, “The idea of purification by expulsion became a legitimate aspect of statecraft” and the religious refugee a mass phenomenon. But in the framework of the so-called refugee crisis, this history, which contains basic insights relevant for today's world, tends to be forgotten. Similarly, “far from being an exceptional crisis the 2015 moment of large groups of refugees into Germany is merely a moment in a long history of forced, partly forced, and relatively unforced movement of people in Europe and the rest of the world” (Van der Veer, Chapter 2; see also Nagel). In the aftermath

of the Second World War, in 1950, there were twelve million refugees (the so-called *Heimatvertriebene*) from Eastern Europe in Germany (four million in the German Democratic Republic [GDR—communist East Germany], eight million in the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG—West Germany]). Having grown up in the FRG myself, I find it intriguing to note that the process of accommodating such huge numbers of refugees, though certainly difficult and painful for many of them (e.g., Krauss 2011; Hoffmann and Schwartz 1999), has received relatively little attention in the German national memory (at least in my experience, which echoes Kalsky 2007).

What this shows is that the acceptability and growing “invisibility” of former refugees depends on how they are classified. There is a big difference between people who can be “naturalized,” by virtue of their “blood,” as part of the German nation, and others who may not be qualified to belong, because of their ethnicity, race, or religion. Against this background, German chancellor Merkel’s slogan *Wir schaffen das* seems to echo the post-Second World War effort to accommodate a huge number of refugees, bringing back to public memory an awareness of Germany as a country of immigration. This idea is also profiled by the musealization of certain parts of the Border Transit Camp in Friedland in 2016, which hosted mainly Christian refugees from Eastern Europe in the period after the Second World War and now accommodates new arrivals of (mainly Muslim) refugees, as shown by Alexander-Kenneth Nagel. Such reminders of Germany’s welcoming stance toward refugees were commended by many, including the Protestant and Catholic churches. But the ongoing protests against this stance also show that hospitality is partial and not meant for every refugee. This confirms the power of national narratives to judge who belongs and who does not, as well as to determine the conditions under which refugees can be accommodated (often in terms of “integration” rather than multicultural plurality).

The framing of the arrival of the refugees in 2015 as a crisis also instills forgetfulness about relatively recent accommodations of refugees. Compared with the current upheaval about refugees and migrants coming into Europe, Vietnamese who fled communism were welcomed more easily than is currently the case with people from the Middle East and Africa. As Part II, *People on the Move from Vietnam*, shows, since the end of the First Indochina War in 1954 and even more so after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, huge numbers of Vietnamese settled in Europe, the United States, and other countries (for figures, see Ninh). At the height of the Cold War, they were taken as the refugees from communism who deserved support by states and mainstream churches. As Phi-Vân Nguyen

points out, Catholic support for Vietnamese as well as Chinese and Korean “victims of Communist atrocities” was framed in terms of a battle between atheist communism and Christianity. The logic of the Cold War induced sympathy for people who were persecuted for their religion, be it Catholicism or Buddhism. Compared with the current situation, it is remarkable how relatively smooth the adoption of Vietnamese refugees—often circumscribed as “boat people”—from camps in Asia into “third countries” occurred. Remarkably, in the FRG, these refugees were received without having to submit individual asylum applications, but were accepted as part of a defined “contingent” of Vietnamese in need (*Kontingentflüchtlinge*) (Ngo and Mai). Similarly, Christians from Syria also received and still receive special treatment; being subject to persecution on religious grounds (in their case not by communism, but by Islam), they are more likely to be granted asylum than other refugees (Murre-van den Berg). This is not to suggest that the actual reception of Vietnamese Catholics, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions and Middle Eastern Orthodox Christians in European host societies went smoothly; our volume discloses many structural similarities among the problems faced by refugees from Vietnam, the Middle East, and Africa in finding a place and gaining acceptance in their new host societies (see in the next section). The point is that the likelihood of being welcomed and granted asylum depends to a large extent on the place of refugees and their religion in geopolitical scenarios, such as the Cold War or the “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington) that became dominant post-9/11.

In sum, our volume works against the lure of exceptionalism conveyed by the crisis framing, which arguably contributes to a muting of past experiences with refugees in European memory. One insight offered by our volume is that we must draw explicit links between ongoing research on recent migrations by people from the Global South and the history of refugees and religious plurality in Europe. The fact is that European states have produced *and* accommodated (religious) refugees throughout the past 500 years. This being so, we must regard Europe as religiously plural by default (see also Kippenberg, Rüpke, and Von Stuckrad 2009).

State Politics of Religious Plurality

“Thinking with history,” Wayne te Brake invites us to detect recurrent patterns in the regulation of religion by states throughout European history and beyond. As he explains, in the aftermath of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the weak

compromises that underpinned religious plurality were often derailed, yielding polarization and the (forced) dislocation of religious minorities. “Official religious intolerance” and the striving for “religious ‘unity and purity’” by rulers and their privileged religious partners ended up classifying people with certain religious convictions as dissidents. Depending on the formal and legal structures of the state they were in, dissidents could face forced migration, tolerance for their expression of their religion, the need to adjust and adapt to the circumstances, or the need to go into hiding and dissimulate. The different national templates of regulating religion on the level of the state in various European countries and the UK that Te Brake distinguishes still have repercussions in the accommodation of refugees in our time. While he emphasizes the power of political and religious authorities to regulate religion, he also calls on us to recognize the “powerful agency of religious ‘dissenters,’ ‘outsiders’ and ‘newcomers’” and how this plays out in actual “patterns of coexistence”—a point that, of course, motivates the ethnographic approach to people on the move and fixed in institutions throughout this volume.

Te Brake’s project of “thinking with” the insights gained through his earlier detailed historical research (2017) offers much welcome historical relief to theoretical work around secularity and secularism in religious studies and anthropology (e.g., Asad 2003; Casanova 2019b; Mahmood 2015; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2011). Among scholars in these fields, there is broad agreement to reject the conventional secularization thesis that has long offered the dominant analytical frame in the study of religion in modern societies and still informs public debates. What comes in its place is the understanding that the category of the secular as deployed by modern states produces, facilitates, and regulates what we have come to define as religion (see Giumbelli 2013).⁷ The question how to grasp the dynamics and plurality of contemporary religious environments in the context of secular formations in nation-states in the Global North and Global South is one of the greatest empirical and conceptual issues faced by the study of religion today. As Salah Punathil’s contribution shows, in most of the world, nation-states are only recent inventions and national borders shift for all kinds of reasons, such as religious conflicts, while secularity is shaped in highly context-dependent ways that may offer much room for the public manifestation of (a certain) religion. Punathil demonstrates the fragility and porosity of borders between states in South Asia and between refugee camps and the rest of society. Both territorial sovereignty and local security are constantly contested in many societies.

Aiming to grasp the accommodation of refugees in particular nation-states, our volume speaks to these broader issues. For it is through the study of modalities

of accommodation that it is possible to lay bare partly taken-for-granted state-religion arrangements, beyond the proverbial “separation of Church and State.” Claims in favor of such a separation are enveloped in the long-standing policies deployed by nation-states in regulating religion that are grounded in specific national templates and patterns of coexistence (in the sense of te Brake). Accommodation systems for refugees reflect such national templates (see also Bowen, Bertossi, Duyvendak, and Krook 2013). As Alexander-Kenneth Nagel shows, German refugee accommodation centers are not well equipped to host refugees with a Muslim background. Analyzing the spatial layout of Friedland, he observes a mismatch between the strong insistence on religious neutrality and the framing of the camp as a secular space, on the one hand, and its prominent Christian infrastructure—with a church, a chapel, and an iconic bell on the campground and activities of Christian welfare initiatives—on the other. It is a microcosm that crystallizes how a formally secular space of reception is inflected with the mostly unquestioned presence of Christianity and a lingering tendency to privilege refugees with a Christian background. This raises issues for Muslim refugees as to the extent they are accommodated to live their religion (apart from receiving halal food) and may fuel interreligious tensions.

Such issues and tensions, of course, also play out in the public domain in general and shape our current plural religious environments at large. Clearly, existing national templates and long-standing pattern of coexistence do not entail that all religions are valued and treated equally. In Germany, which receives much attention in our volume, the “parity template” (te Brake) allowed for the peaceful coexistence of Catholics and Lutherans after the *Augsburger Religionsfriede* (1555) that was extended to Calvinists in 1648. Challenged during the nineteenth-century *Kulturkampf*, this template retained its resilience and is still in place. But as the contributions by Thien-Huong Ninh, Tam Ngo and Nga Mai, Abdoualye Sounaye, and Alexander-Kenneth Nagel highlight, religious newcomers—refugees and migrants—face difficulties in being recognized; they “may perceive religious parity as exclusionary privilege” (te Brake) that cements the status quo, but offers religious newcomers and minorities little room for religious expression.⁸ This pertains particularly to the public expression of material religious forms, from clothes to building temples and mosques. While freedom of religion is granted quite easily on the level of belief and conviction, the material and corporeal manifestation of religions triggers societal tensions and debates.⁹

The limited possibilities for full material and corporeal manifestations of religion are not necessarily and exclusively due not only to legal barriers and

state policies that do not allow them to live their religion but also to public opinion. Across Europe, the balance between the acknowledgment that refugees and migrants have certain, albeit limited legal rights to practice their religion, as backed by national constitutions, and the actual acceptance of them doing so in public opinion is shifting. This lack of acceptance is grounded in resilient patterns of the discrimination of minorities like the Jews and “gypsies” and racist stereotypes based in colonialism and its fantasies of the superiority of the white Europeans; in such situations, the presence of such others is often met with a sense of disgust, and they are rejected for being “dirty” and polluting the nation.¹⁰ While these ideas and affects do not directly relate to policies that regulate religious coexistence, they nonetheless linger on and, as we see, are easily resuscitated by far-right populist movements. As Oscar Verkaaik and Pooyan Tamimi Arab (2016) note, there is a cleavage between constitutional and cultural secularism, in that certain rights, such as the freedom of religious expression, are challenged in the name of culturalized and exclusivist understandings of citizenship and belonging (see also Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). While public opinion has come to be more secularist in orientation and has suspicions about the religiosity of refugees and migrants (van der Veer 2006; Schuh, Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012), there is also a tendency to rediscover the Christian roots of national and European culture, in whose name refugees and migrants with a non-Christian—de facto usually Muslim—background are held to not belong (Nagel, Sounaye; see also Götz 2020; Marzouki, MacDonnell, and Roy 2016; Meyer 2019; Van den Hemel 2018). Such a mobilization of a “secular sacred” (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, and Stengs 2020) in the current politics of belonging arouses moods and emotions that tap into cosmologies and repertoires of a culturalized Christianity or Christendom. These repertoires are at the heart of the political theology of populism, as several contributors to the volume *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis* (Schmiedel and Smith 2018) argue compellingly.¹¹

As Erin Wilson and Luca Mavelli point out in the Introduction to their volume *The Refugee Crisis and Religion* (2017), public discourse distinguishes between “good” and “bad” religion, the latter being strongly identified with Islam, understood as a religion that persecutes religious Others. The suspicions about Islam also entail a “‘good Muslim, bad Muslim’ narrative” (2017: 6) that construes Muslims either as potentially dangerous or as victims of their own religious tradition. In public discourse, there certainly is a hierarchy of valuation of religions, in which Christianity tends to be privileged (especially persecuted Christians from Vietnam or the Middle East, as noted earlier) and in which

Buddhism ranks higher than Islam. While it is important to analyze how such hierarchies underpin public debates and shape the readiness to prefer certain refugees to others, this is not the whole story. True to its ethnographic orientation, our volume shows how refugees and migrants on the ground grapple with their situation in societies that have long been dominated by Christianity and are now in a process of rapid de-churching. As Ninh observes, “even though religious diversity and freedom are fundamental rights in these Western countries [Germany and the US—BM], religion has become the proxy through which Vietnamese refugees are marginalized to the fringes of society as ethnic and racial minorities.” Heleen Murre-van den Berg points out that Syriac Orthodox Christians, who are often mistaken for Muslims in their first encounters with native Dutch, navigate between affirming their acceptance of the secular state in the Netherlands and struggling to transmit their traditional ethical norms, which diverge from the secular Dutch majority and bring them closer to the Muslims from whom they insist they differ. And Abdoulaye Sounaye reports the struggles of West African Muslim refugees in Berlin to eschew marginalization and discrimination not by native Germans, but also by other Muslims. Their efforts to build their own mosque and thus a viable social and ritual place in Muslim Berlin are part of their attempts to gain space and status as black African Muslims. It is interesting to note that, while Vietnamese refugees were more welcome than current refugees from Africa and the Middle East, the experiences of both groups of refugees in deploying their religion in their new host societies are quite similar. They all remained religious, ethnic, and racialized Others. Granted certain rights, they are expected to reciprocate the “gift of freedom” by being “grateful for having been saved” (Hoskins; see also Ghorashi 2014; Nayeri 2019); they feel and are made to feel that they are not quite at home in a mainstream national or European culture that is increasingly closing down and looking back to its presumed roots and heritage.

While our volume concentrates on the accommodation of (former) refugees and their trajectory as migrants and citizens in Europe, the perspective on national templates of regulating religion is also useful with regard to states in the Global South, as shown by the intriguing case of Morocco, which many people on the move from sub-Saharan Africa pass through and where they may get stuck for some time or even decide to stay. Johara Berriane unpacks how Pentecostals from Congo and other African countries find niches in the existing regulation of religious coexistence in this majority Muslim country, in which Sunni Islam is the state religion, while Jews are recognized as a national minority and mainstream Christian churches are recognized as spaces for worship for

foreigners (conversion to Christianity is forbidden). The enduring and often loud presence of house churches in Moroccan cities entails complex negotiations on the part of the state authorities to grant the religious rights of these Pentecostal newcomers, while also keeping them under control and preventing them from proselytizing.

So, this section highlights that national templates and long-standing patterns of coexistence form the conditions under which refugees are accommodated and in which they and other migrants have to position themselves. A focus on refugees and religion, as in this volume, offers privileged insights into such patterns as well as their gradual negotiation and transformation. This reveals a logic of closure and fixing through which people on the move are put in a certain state-run order that does not quite fit them. Taking such a perspective is of crucial importance to determine the space afforded to refugees and migrants and to apprehend how they respond and negotiate possibilities. But this perspective is partial. The next section will look at the refugees-and-religion nexus from the angle of movement.

Religion as a Boundary-Transgressing Force

Over the past two decades, much attention has been paid to transnational religion, in the sense of people moving between different locations, as travelers, pilgrims, migrants, or refugees. Rethinking religion from the vector of mobility was important to correct a scholarly bias toward the nation as the taken-for-granted habitat of religion and unit of scholarly analysis. As Peggy Levitt put it aptly in her conceptual roadmap for the study of “religion on the move”: “We assume that religious practices and organizations obediently respect national boundaries. We take stasis and boundedness as the default categories for organizing religious life while, in fact, many religious ideas and practices are often and unabashedly in motion” (2013: 159). Endorsing Levitt’s critique does not contradict the main idea conveyed in the previous section. The point is to fold both perspectives—of religion as being subject to the ordering structures and boundaries of nation-states *and* as a boundary-transgressing force—into each other (see also Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010: 1). The regulatory mechanisms in state and society do not fully capture and contain people in motion, so it is an important task for scholars to explore what exists in excess of the orders into which these people are accommodated. What are their own narratives about being on the move, and how do these narratives link up with theological ideas about mobility?

Of course, mobility is intrinsically engrained in religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which spread around the globe long before the current global order of nation-states emerged and which involve theologies of mobility, foregrounding experiences of diaspora and exile in the case of Judaism and missionizing activities and global networks in the case of Christianity and Islam. This huge and intriguing theme deserves an extensive comparative investigation. In our volume, the chapters by Phi-Vân Nguyen and Thien-Huong Ninh call attention to the transnationality of the Catholic Church. While the former looks at the flight of Catholic refugees from North Vietnam in the 1950s, from where the exodus of Catholics around the world started to unfold, the latter explores how contemporary Catholic ex-refugees reach back to Vietnam from Germany and the United States. Starting his chapter with the iconic image of a Vietnamese refugee holding a crucifix while deep asleep, Nguyen points to the political relevance of mediating the exodus of Vietnamese Catholics from North to South Vietnam as grounded in their deep faith. Such a faith is held to motivate people to move away from regimes that suppress their religion and seek refuge elsewhere. The idea of authentic faith as the genuine cause for people fleeing and applying for asylum is not only reiterated in Christian representations of the predicament of refugees but also taken as a crucial factor in court decision whether to grant or withhold asylum, as is the case with Muslims who converted to Christianity (Wheeler; see also Stadlbauer 2018; Reid 2018).¹²

Zooming in on the transnational ties between Catholics in Vietnam, the United States, and Germany, Ninh points out how the new iconography of a Vietnamese-looking *Our Lady of Lavang* serves former refugees as an emblem of a deterritorialized imagined community “beyond the territorial boundaries of their dead homeland (South Vietnam) and new host societies.” Authorized by the Vatican and recognized in Vietnam, this Lady has become a new iconic figure that joins Vietnamese Catholics across the world, serving as a reminder of coerced displacement and dispersion. This case is very interesting because it reveals how communities of refugees that settled in new host countries deploy creative energies to craft new religious forms that circulate through transnational networks, setting Catholicism in motion by generating new cultic material forms. We find a similar dynamic at work among the Syriac Orthodox community in the Netherlands. As Heleen Murre-van den Berg points out, its leaders search for new materials and modalities to transmit the Orthodox literary heritage to subsequent generations to keep the tradition alive and ongoing. This suggests that refugees “in diaspora” may play a central role in fueling innovations that

are, after all, the *sine qua non* for the reproduction of a religious tradition under new circumstances.

Similarly, Tam Ngo and Nga Mai draw attention to the amazing industriousness of Vietnamese Buddhists in building temples and pagodas. Differentiated between former contract laborers, successors of the “boat people,” and newly arrived refugees, the Vietnamese population in Germany experiences many divisions and conflicts. Stating that “all these people have left Vietnam, but they have not left it behind,” the authors offer intriguing insights into the ways past tensions and distinctions still play out among the former refugees in the host country, while at the same time the Vietnamese state seeks to use Buddhism to gain control over this diaspora. The chapter brings to mind the remarkable resilience of former refugees and migrants in the face of their experiences, long after they have settled and may even have received dual citizenship. They are on the move, but do not achieve a full rupture with their—for many, traumatic—past.

Tropes of journeys, flows, crossings, and dwellings abound in the repertoires of religious traditions (Tweed 2006). And yet, as Janet Hoskins points out, “the theological implications of migration and especially the forced displacement of refugees have rarely been explored. (. . .) Religious ritual and scripture can serve to provide a narrative that explains the reasons for this displacement.”¹³ Her chapter compares the theological narratives of Caodaism and Mother Goddess temples. Both are indigenous religious traditions that operate on a transnational scale and are popular among refugees and migrants outside of Vietnam. Both traditions emphasize movement, albeit in different ways, with the former endorsing “the idea of a sacred journey to ‘the west’” and the latter engaging in “trance dances” through which spirits from Vietnam are conjured and made present in the diaspora. Hoskins’s approach is compelling because it shows how vernacular theologies of mobility feed into migration narratives grounded in divergent experiences and underpin attitudes toward the host country and the original home.

The importance of theologies of mobility also comes to the fore in Alessandro Gusman’s account of Congolese refugees stuck in Kampala. Invoking the narrative of the exodus of the people of Israel and their long crossing through the desert, Pentecostals inscribe their suffering and despair in this ancient epic frame, feeling “captive” and waiting to get to the “Promised Land.” Interesting here is that this narrative of movement is mobilized in a moment when people are bound to wait in transit, offering them hope to get moving again. For them, faith is a guide that helps them endure and remain patient, while not losing

hope in the possibility of (re)gaining social and spatial mobility. Similarly, failing to jump over the fences that separate Morocco from the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla,¹⁴ Congolese Pentecostals in Morocco feel stuck at the increasingly guarded borders of Europe. They attribute their forced immobility to the spell of curses that tie them, via their families, to ancestral powers that are understood as demons; they seek deliverance from these ancestral powers to get rid of “the spiritual blocks to their emigration.” Biblical role models, including Job, are cited to help these Pentecostals make sense of and endure their precarious situation. These three chapters show in an exemplary manner that attention to the interface of (vernacular) theologies of mobility and migration narratives offers deep insights into the everyday struggles of people on the move. They also teach that the notion of “people on the move” needs to be qualified. Being on the move may de facto imply being bound to wait for a long time. Rather than being nothing, “waiting is a particular engagement in, and with, time” (Bandak and Janea 2018: 1), as our volume also shows.

Waiting is also the main “activity” for those who managed to reach their destination in Europe or UK and apply for asylum. In this limbo, many refugees depend on support from religious groups, including Christian churches and organizations, some of which actively proselytize among non-Christians. William Wheeler narrates the unsettling story of Abdul, whose conversion story from Islam to Christianity became the object of bureaucratic and legal inquiry and was eventually judged inauthentic by the Home Office, as is the case with large numbers of persons on the move who file for asylum in vain.

So, this section spotlights the importance of theologies of mobility and transmitted narratives in situations of displacement and migration, triggering departures, giving meaning to the experiences undergone, and making long holdups bearable. While regulated by nation-states in one way or another, religion potentially exceeds this regulation because it implies a principle of movement and mediation between here and there, immanent and transcendent, beginning and end (see Tweed 2006; for my own approach, see Meyer 2020a). This comes particularly to the fore when studying people on the move from the angle of their own religious views and narratives. Their stories challenge conceptualizations of religion as entirely bound within national templates, however real and taken for granted they may appear. Looking at religion as a boundary-transgressing force in a global order of nation-states, this volume points to the ongoing interplay of flows and closures in which not only refugees but also the societies from where they flee and those they reach out to, are entangled (see Meyer and Geschiere 1998).

Mobilizing Theory

Over the past decade, and even more so since the arrival of large numbers of refugees in Europe, I have noticed that the difference between my work as a scholar studying religion in Africa and my attempts to grasp the politics of religious plurality in the world I inhabit as a citizen (the Netherlands and Germany) is becoming increasingly blurred. The geographical, cultural, and political boundaries that separate Europe from Africa are proving to be highly permeable, echoing long-standing connections and entanglements (Friese 2014). While “Europe” has long been present in “Africa” and other regions of its imperial outreach, people from these regions are in Europe, or are trying to get in. As I argued recently (Meyer 2018), European societies have long become *de facto* postcolonial “frontier zones” (Chidester 1996) in which religious and other differences are articulated, encountered, negotiated, and governed. As the refugee issue shows so clearly, the enforcement and surveillance of boundaries as well as the regulation of religious plurality are a matter of politics that is geared to delineate and order a world that is *de facto* shaped by long-standing transregional connections and always in motion.

Requiring collaborations among scholars with expertise on societies in the Global South *and* Europe, a viable analysis of these dynamics demands a new transregional and pluralistic mindset, as well as new synergies between academic fields such as African and Asian anthropology, European history, law, religious studies, and migration studies (Meyer 2020b). This endeavor must mobilize theory. And I mean “mobilize” not simply in the sense of a call for theory to make sense of the trajectories of people on the move, but in the sense of “theory as a practice of travel and observation” that harks back to the Greek term *theorein*, as proposed by James Clifford (1989). Postcolonial thought has deployed the point he raised more than thirty years ago that the privileged position of the West as the natural place of theory is “increasingly contested, cut across, by other locations, claims, trajectories of knowledge articulating racial, gender, and cultural differences,” yielding calls for theory from the South. And for the study of religion, along similar lines Thomas Tweed has launched a take on theory as itinerary. For him, theories are “proposals for a journey, representations of a journey, and the journey itself” (2006: 9). My idea of mobilizing theory builds on these insights, while at the same time the focus on the refugees-and-religion nexus offers a special twist. The contributions to our volume have each traced specific parts of the itineraries of refugees, and together they offer a dazzling picture of an entangled world with connections and relations, as well as borders

and boundaries. Theory is to be rendered mobile to make sense of this entangled world from multiple locations and grounded in the practices and experiences of people on the move.

Though subject to long-standing criticism from postcolonial angles, a Eurocentric bias still lingers on in the social and cultural sciences. This is because the disciplines that comprise the social sciences and humanities traditionally entail a strong orientation toward the nation-state as the presumably natural social and political form. Even in the face of globalization, there is still not only a “methodological” but also an “epistemological” nationalism (Beck 2007) that preempts taking historical and current entanglements seriously as a ground for knowledge production and that is prepared to rethink Europe from its supposed margins (Mbembe 2017) and with people on the move, for a different view of the world.

It is easier to think in terms of bounded units than in terms of motion. This is at least the conventional mode of knowledge production in which scholars are trained. Deconstructed through genealogical research on the rise of modern epistemologies of power knowledge along lines set out by Foucault, this way of knowledge production is nonetheless resilient. It is deeply engrained in the sociological imagination, yet always haunted by the presence of Others who challenge conventional ordering principles. For those drawing and guarding political boundaries, movement “in the sense of disrespect of boundaries and borders, the transgression of imaginary lines or indeed concrete ones (in the form of walls and fences) between regions and categories of people claiming these regions as their territories, as their turf, which should not be invaded and polluted” (Verrips 2011: 209), is suspicious because it causes disorder. The political measures taken to prevent or at least channel movement are an important research topic. However, as this volume shows, such research cannot be done successfully from an epistemology grounded in a sedentary, bounded logic for which movement is itself a problem.

In his insightful study of Kant and his colleague philosopher and linguist Christian Jakob Kraus (1753–1807), who conducted research on “gypsies” (“Zigeuner”) in Königsberg, Kurt Röttgers contrasts two forms of reason: settled (“sesshaft”) and nomadic (1993; see also Verrips 2011: 205–7). Kant favored the settled, ordering, and measuring reason of the land surveyor, who was to chart the true order of the world, over the nomadic reason of skeptics and empiricists; his dislike of this type of reason was grounded in his disapproval of nomads who detest steady work on the soil. By contrast, Kraus, through his investigations among the “gypsies,” encountered and valued such a nomadic or

itinerant (*vagabundierend*) reason that, alas, he could only talk about (also with Kant), but not write about, due to his persistent writer's block. Röttgers sees this itinerant reason, which he traces through the few documents left by the more or less forgotten Kraus, as part of an alternative, nomadic Enlightenment. Existing in the shadow of pure, settled reason, nomadic reason is not interested in reaching fixed points, but seeks to extend lines, "to continue the route of the nomads adequately in theory; Deleuze/Guattari would say: making rhizomes" (1993: 107, translation BM).

Röttgers's exposé is intriguing because it offers a glimpse of a genealogy of modern knowledge production predicated on the role of the land surveyor who oversees, charts, and maps and is at loss with regard to people on the move. My point is not to reject this territorial form of knowledge production per se, but to keep in mind that itinerant or nomadic reason is an alternative possibility, if only to better understand the interfaces of flows and closures to which the study of people on the move, and refugees in particular, draws attention (see also Braidotti 2011). Nomadic reason is at the heart of the idea of mobilizing theory I have in mind. Of course, anthropology has long challenged the settled reason at the core of Eurocentric modes of knowledge production (Därmann 2005; Fabian 2000: 275–81). The by now dawning insight that Europe is a postcolonial frontier zone calls for a sustained effort in the social and cultural sciences to mobilize theory to be able to make critical sense of our open and at the same time closed, interconnected world. The research on the refugees-and-religion nexus presented in this volume underscores the pressing importance of this endeavor.

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* www.religiousmatters.nl

