

PART 4

Epilogue



At the Threshold: A Panorama for Future Research and Challenges to Religious Studies

Lucien van Liere

Imagine there is no religion. Would that really matter? Would we perceive the world differently if the word 'religion' would not be part of our analytical vocabulary? Certainly, we should avoid 'what if' scenarios. Religion 'is' there, at least as a word functioning in popular, political and academic discourses alike. And indeed, the word 'does' something. Where it is used, the debate often turns into a certain direction, evokes images, memories, fears or feelings of home and of contestation. But does this not mean that the question of what religion 'is' should be replaced by what the word religion 'does' in public and political discursive fields?

'Religion' as such is certainly difficult to study. But then again, what 'is' it? Is it a phenomenon, a discourse, a thing? Can you say: 'there goes religion'? What practices, speeches, texts and materials are identified as 'religion' or 'religious' and by whom? And who dares to use the plural to compare different 'phenomena' as 'religious'? The boundaries of religion are vague, liquid and historically unstable, we can say. But *are* there boundaries and have there ever been? And if yes, what do they border, what do they include, exclude and what and who? Or should we engage in a post-secular turn and declare the boundaries of religion as predominantly political?

What counts as 'religion' at the academy remains an object of study. But here also, many questions remain and often respond to all too certain descriptions of 'what' it 'is'. Is it possible, for example, to distinguish between 'religious practices' on the one hand, and cultural practices, political practices or discourses on human rights on the other?¹ Can we argue that these practices we identified as 'religious' are a 'special way' of doing things, a special way of

1 Elie Wiesel has called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 50 years after its establishment on 10 December 1948, a 'world-wide secular religion', cf.: Elie Wiesel, 'A Tribute to Human Rights', in: Y. Danieli et al., *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Fifty Years and Beyond* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 1999), p. 3. Former Secretary-General of the UN Kofi-Annan called the Declaration "the yardstick by which we measure human progress". For a critical assessment of these discourses, labelled as 'idolatry', cf.: Michael Ignatieff, 'Human Rights as Idolatry', in: Amy Gutmann, *Michael Ignatieff, Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 53f.

relating, linking and describing, informed by texts and rituals that are clearly distinguishable from other—say: political—practices? Or, should we avoid using the term ‘religion’ all together and resort to other terms like ‘the sacred’ (in a Durkheimian,² or why not in an Ottoian³ sense?), the ‘non-negotiable’, a ‘primary frame’⁴ or just ‘traditions of meaning’? These questions are rather academic. In public discourses, but still also in many scholarly discourse outside the ‘study of religion’, the word ‘religion’ is often used to refer to an established set of meaning-giving practices, often linked to ‘identity’, with clear boundaries along the classic traditions, and often also with an inherent link to transcendence that somehow gives ritualized communal power to ‘meaning’.

This volume is a collection of scholarly witnesses of how ‘meaning’ is discursively addressed, practiced and used as frame at different social and cultural levels. ‘Religion’ is addressed openly from the fundamental idea that there is no ‘classic’ description of what ‘it’ exactly entails and from the idea that academic definitions inherently contain frames of power and specific ‘grand histories’.⁵ Contesting religious identities can be understood as a wide pallet of research into the different constructions and formations of ‘meaning’ in the

2 Cf. for example: Matthew Francis, ‘Why the ‘sacred’ is a better resource than ‘religion’ for understanding terrorism, in: *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015, at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.976625> (date accessed: 07-07-2016).

3 Robert Orsi for example writes: “The famous epistemic ‘bracket’ of religious studies, which is the practice of setting aside questions about the ontological realness of religious phenomena as a condition of research—we are not interested in whether or not the Blessed Mother *really* appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes, we say, thus immediately making the seer into a psychotic—begins to seem false or inadequate. These scholars have witnessed something in their fieldwork or historical study, close to home and across the globe, which they want to name and without which theories of religion seem to be beside the point. They have seen (...) that Jesus is a real figure in a Pentacostal woman’s everyday experience, as real to her as the other people around her (...). She does not ‘believe in’ Jesus. Jesus is present to her.” Robert A. Orsi, ‘The problem of the holy’, in: Robert A. Orsi, *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 84–85.

4 Erving Goffman mentions so-called ‘primary frames’. Primary frames, he argues, vary in degree of organization. While some are presentable, most others are not. These last frames do not have an “apparent articulated shape”. They provide only a “lore of understanding”. Despite this vagueness, people relate to this unarticulated frame, identifying specific occurrences in its terms. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis, An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 21.

5 Asja Szafranec and Ernst van den Hemel write: “... it became clear that the very notion of religion itself and the desire to grasp it conceptually can themselves be part and parcel of a grand history, placing religion squarely in opposition to its classical counterparts, politics, law, or science”. Asja Szafranec and Ernst van den Hemel, ‘Introduction. Any More Deathless

public space, into how this meaning is performed in plural and global societies, how meaning disseminates and how it is both object and subject of often mediatic contestations. In this epilogue I will harvest the insights discussed in the different chapters, put these into the wide frame of religious studies and formulate some challenges to the future study of 'religion', 'religions' and the 'religious'. I will do so by paying attention to (1) the place of normativity in the study of religion and to (2) the intricate context of the secular where 'religion' forms a specific mode of discourse. Both 'gates' into the subject of 'meaning' are persistently present throughout this volume, as I will show.

Normativity and 'Religion'

Unavoidably the study of meaning-giving cannot do without its past. In recent decades, the classic and established study of theology became smaller and smaller or even disappeared from European universities. In The Netherlands some universities transformed their programmes from classical theology with clear professional exits into more general programmes concerning the academic study of the role of 'religion' in public places, often with a special interest in Islam.⁶ Whereas 'theology' covered a specialized study of debates on revelation and thinking, doctrine and social reality, normativity, exegesis of texts, hermeneutics and the history of text-production, text-interpretation and of the church, the study of religion uses disciplines like sociology, psychology, history and anthropology with related methodologies, to understand the (discursive) function of 'religion' in public debates, human rights, politics and identity-performance in the public space, leaving themes like 'truth' to philosophers and often—but not always—trying to avoid any influx of normativity, as if this would be contagious. Although normativity is methodologically avoided, it nevertheless forms the heart of what is studied.

In this volume normativity is addressed at different levels. There remains the level that links 'meaning' to an explanatory but also transformative way of dealing with human behaviour (Joerg Rieger, Joachim Duyndam); there is

Questions?', in: Ernst van den Hemel and Asja Szafranec (eds), *Words, Religious Language Matters* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 2.

6 Birgit Meyer writes: "This trend, which occurs throughout Europe, materializes in line with the specific ways in which the relation between the state and (Christian) religion has been configured institutionally, legally and culturally on the national level." Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence, Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2012), p. 38.

the level of doing research into this normativity (Adriaan van Klinken) and link normative-communal patterns to perspectives on autonomy, freedom and society (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, Müller); there is also a level where perspectives on normativity are mediated by materiality (Anna Strhan, Patrick Eisenlohr) or rituals (Göle), or where the normative is mediated or even presented in a mimetic model such as a doll (Martha Frederiks); there is, finally, also the level at which the normative has, as a frame for desire, become a cultural hinge between the textual past and the feared and longed for future (Tina Pippin).

How then is the normative mediated? And by whom and by what? Strhan shows how senses play a fascinating role at different levels of mediation in a conservative evangelical community in London. Normativity is situated in the Bible but is present at the same time in the listening and hearing body where 'outside' and 'inside' conflate. Listening to the Bible is hearing the voice of God (presuming trust and linkage). A comparable normativity is addressed theologically with the Body of Christ as a theological theme reformulated by African theologians dealing with HIV/AIDS. Adriaan van Klinken shows how this functions both as a referential metaphor but at the same time as a uniting immanent body of communication and responsibility in a globalized world. Van Klinken shows how African theologians present local suffering as a global responsibility, thus creating new modes of interconnectedness that brings hidden power-structures to the surface. The body of Christ unites and brings the local to the level of the global. Meaning does not only travel, but it also recharges core-themes of religious communities with new content, blurring the boundaries between what is global and local through assertive normativity; the body of Christ as an intervening space that contests self-perspectives of western Christianities.

Meaning travels through time (Pippin; Eisenlohr) and space (Frederiks) and reaches out. As it reaches out, it appeals. The study of 'religion' is the study of this appeal and of the different trajectories it travels and lineages it creates,⁷ of how it transforms, constructs, reconstructs and performs, and of how it contests and is contested. How to understand this appeal, put normative within the context of meaning, from a psychological or sociological perspective? How do the London evangelicals create sociologically a discourse that makes the Bible speak and make them hear the voice of God? How does this 'hearing

7 Cf.: Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2000). Hervieu-Léger argues that 'religion' should not be taken as such, as—say—a system of belief, norms and values, but as a *chain of memory* which incorporates the individual into a community. This way, religion is a device recreating individual and collective awareness of belonging to a lineage, standing in a tradition of believers.

the Word of God' work as identity-performance, inclusion and exclusion. Why are the African theologians using a textual theme to stress the appeal of their message? What relationships are constructed by using Biblical metaphors and what does it exclude? How do these metaphors travel through time determining our understanding of the future as a disaster for most of us and a blessing for the happy few / the elect? Certainly, the study of religion developed a strong focus on sociological and anthropological perspectives on human behaviour. But lack of knowledge of theological traditions will not help to understand symbolic trajectories (the trajectory of the appeal) as proposed by religious communities like 'the Body of Christ', authority of the Torah, Quran or Bible, or the spatio-temporal schemes that binds the future to the past. *That* these themes work in the construction of a group is important to notice, but *why* they work the way they do and, for example, why 'the Body of Christ' can be a stronger metaphor than inter-human solidarity, is not easy to answer without knowledge of theologies that have—up till a certain extent—influenced the identity-formation of religious groups throughout their histories. Should, then, religious studies also include the study of the doctrines, dogma's, texts and theologies to avoid explanations that remain too much at the surface of description or statistics? How to deal with theologies certainly is a challenge to the study of religion, where many resort to social-constructivist perspectives on identity-performance but neglect, as Robert Orsi suggest, that for the Pentecostal woman the existence of Jesus is as real as the existence of other persons.⁸ This not only suggests that there is actually a person for whom the existence of Jesus is 'real' but raises a question that should be taken seriously in the study of religions: what is 'real',⁹ how is the real constructed, projected, understood; how is the real related to the senses (van de Belt, Strhan), to phantasy (Pippin), to what 'ought to be' (Frederiks; Rieger), or to what 'should be' (van Klinken) and how is the 'real' presented by media-frames and by media-religions (Eisenlohr; Pippin; Hirzalla, van Zoonen, Müller)?

Texts and Embodiment

An important theme in this volume and strongly related to normativity are the readings, uses and the impact of 'texts'. The official or unofficial status of 'texts'

8 Orsi, 'The problem of the holy', p. 85.

9 Jean Baudrillard, the theorist of 'virtual reality', asks: "Why might there not be as many real worlds as imaginary ones? Why a single real world?" Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London, New York: Verso, 1996), p. 97.

within religious frames may differ, but somehow texts are reified and 'speak', like in the phrase of the evangelical pastor who preaches: 'the Bible says . . .', thus suspending time and space between there and here, then and now, (Eisenlohr) them and us.¹⁰ The reading of texts is closely related to embodiment. Whether the Thora fuses with the body (Ottenheijm), disputes about how to trust your senses and how to read the Bible (van de Belt), experiences of how texts 'speak' (Strhan) or how they visualize desire (Pippin); texts function as a specific, embodied 'appeal' within communities where these texts are given 'meaning' and explanatory power, while at the same time texts themselves are mediating space and gender (Camp). Albeit they 'give' meaning, they are also given meaning by the community in which they function as link to the past and as contemporary function.¹¹ In early Judaism, a perspective prevailed that only the "unconditional study and practice of the Torah is life", Ottenheijm argues. The living human body is the ultimate goal of reading, and the embodied presence of Torah. What Ottenheijm analyses in Judaism is an element of text-reading and textual impact that comes back in both Van de Belt's and Strhan's analyses of the mediation of texts by the senses: texts become perceptions, but how to trust the visual and the audial?

Religious studies should not only scrutinize the uses and functions of texts as mediations between past and present, between the individual and the communal or as contestations of the well-established rational boundaries between 'the real' and 'the fantastic', but should also understand texts as imagined and desired identities. Texts become body in the vicinity of the

10 H.-G. Gadamer grasped this process precisely when he wrote: "Written texts (...) contain a pure spirit that speaks to us in an eternal presence. The art of reading and understanding written traces is like a magic art (...) in which space and time are suspended." And he continues: "In knowing how to read what is transmitted, we are partaking of and achieving the pure presence of the past" (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 156, cit. and trans. in: Assmann, Aleida, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory, in: *Representations*, No. 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition (Autumn 1996), p. 126.

11 Anne Blackburn argues sharply: "Looking for, and at, textual communities, however, allows scholars of religion, to look into the long histories of such past and contemporary practice by examining what texts—oral, written, and visual—are in play in a particular setting, who uses them, and how they use them. In this way, the misleading homogeneity and temporal stasis of reference to 'traditions' may be set aside for many purposes, in favor of efforts to see and understand at a more modest and representative scale how groups of people are joined and separated by the texts that they engage". Cf. Anne M. Blackburn, "The text and the world", in: Robert A. Orsi, *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 166.

Torah (Ottenheijm¹²) and of the Bible. Frederiks points to how the Quran is embodied or ‘em-dolled’; Ottenheijm shows how text and person unite in the fire; Strhan points to the hearing of words as God’s voice. Texts are part of the continuing reconstruction of ‘social imaginaries’ (in Charles Taylor’s sense of that “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society”¹³). But then again, who said: ‘imagined’? Why not ‘real’? For, as William Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas have argued, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”.¹⁴

Linking and Religion

So what then ‘is’ religion and how to imagine a real of ‘no religion’? Despite much criticism on the current uses of the term ‘religion’ as a modern scientific category, a feature of political programs or a secular imagery,¹⁵ the term

12 Cf. also: Eric Ottenheijm, ‘Belichaamde Tora. Toramystiek in Avot 5:22 volgens de versie in ms.Kaufmann’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 63, 1 (2009), pp. 51–66.

13 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham etc.: Duke University Press 2004), p. 91. Taylor’s concept of social imaginaries is all about expectations that live in a certain social context; expectations “that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p. 106.

14 This is the so-called Thomas-theorem (William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York, 1928), p. 572. Hans G. Kippenberg argues, after writing thoroughly about the different layers of religion-related violence, that this theorem can help to understand what is at stake. Actors, Kippenberg argues, impose definitions on specific circumstances, which contribute to the appearance of what is ‘real’. Hans Kippenberg, *Violence as Worship, Religious Wars in the Age of Globalization*, trans. Brian McNeil (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 199. Indeed, what is real is a matter of defining and definitions ‘made flesh’

15 For critical assessments of the many and often politically or colonially charged uses of the term ‘religion’, cf. for example: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Believing: an Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religion Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion, A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, London: Yale

is still used in many discursive fields to identify practices of meaning-giving as related to other, established practices of ritual, text-reading or gathering. The chapters in this volume do not at all agree on what religion is, nor is there an underlying consensus about what the study of religion exactly entails or should be. Some authors presuppose 'religion' as a tradition, others refer to a relatedness to a certain normativity, others to transcendence, while others clearly jump over the boundaries of scholarly defined religion into the wide open space of meaning-making. All contributors however agree that 'religion' as a discursive and material field relate to signifying practices that can well be studied; practices that become significant and constitute a 'real'. Interestingly, these practices are always linked to specific, often 'material' objects such as dolls (as instruments of Arabic values, Frederiks), places (Göle), vlogs and YouTube (Hirzalla, van Zoonen and Müller), or movies as communication channels of imagined (apocalyptic) endings (Pippin). Practices, in other words, relate to communicative instruments or objects that are charged with and thus mediate meaning, purpose, pursuit, perspectives on the self and otherness etc. These 'objects' may be discursively articulated and repeated ideas and stereotypes but also material objects that always know different, complicated layers, entail histories of meaning, imaginaries, cultural and collective memories and modern wishes to belong. Religious studies should develop methods to understand these complicated layers, dive deeply into the archaeology of meaning-giving, analyse meaning as both a social and also—yes—a neural process, and develop sensibilities to analyse how discourse and matter are on the one hand charged with cultural and collective memories and on the other hand impact inter-human relationships and social practices.

A quit recent current in religious studies take the 'matter' of mediation (and negotiation) as object of study, using a 'material approach' to 'things' that become authorized "and authenticated as harbringers of what lies 'beyond'. Birgit Meyer points to 'sensational forms' that "have the double aspect of streamlining or shaping religious mediation *and* of achieving certain effects by being performed".¹⁶ This way, a 'sensational form' implodes and explodes

University Press, 2013); Anna S. King and Paul Hedges, 'What Is Religion? Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?', in: Paul Hedges (ed.), *Controversies in Contemporary Religion; Education, Law, Politics, Society, and Spirituality* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

16 Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence*, p. 26. Cf. also: Birgit Meyer, 'Mediation and Immediacy, Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium', in: *Social Anthropology*, 19 (2011) 1, pp. 23–39; Matthew Engelke, 'Material religion', in: Robert

subject (perception, memory, belonging) and object (charged matter) at the same time functioning as a source of meaning-giving and meaning-preserving. Things, in this sense—a doll, a vlog, a place etc.—are gateways to the world to which they ‘belong’; the material approach precisely analyses this ‘belonging’ by emphasizing the external side of meaning.

It becomes clear that the very term ‘religion’ can be studied as a discourse that is never neutral but always works in constructing social and political spheres and identities and brings matter into the spheres of meaning. But the term cannot function as a clear frame that limits the object studied. This way, ‘religious studies’ reads up on the uses of ‘religion’ and of ‘religious profiles’ but does not limit itself to meanings that are socially, politically and religiously identified as ‘religious’. Meaning-giving is a common human, not a special activity.¹⁷ The benefit of discussions about the so-called post-secular is that ‘meaning’ as such is not bound to accepted, established trajectories any more but ‘travels’ along the multi-layered frames of life-perception and performance. ‘Meaning’ as such travels as it is contested and as it contests; it transforms, articulates, charges the ‘real’ and (re)frames knowledge, but is at the same time charged and framed. Hence the boundaries between the secular and the religious are liquid¹⁸ (if there are even boundaries), despite the political constructions of clear boundaries between the ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ as separate domains before the law.¹⁹ In this volume, Pippin takes ‘desire’ as meaning-constructing; Strhan emphasizes ‘the senses’; van Klinken writes about ‘global responsibilities’ and Hirzalla, van Zoonen and Müller show how contested identities strengthen themselves in the image of being contested, which—interestingly—may count as yet another example of meaning-construction. These contributions clearly show that wide perspectives on

A. Orsi, *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 209–229.

17 Cf. for example also: L.G. Beaman and S. Tomlins (eds), *Atheist Identities—Spaces and Social Contexts* (Springer, 2015); David M. Holeý, *Meaning and Mystery, What it Means to Believe in God* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

18 Cf. Saba Mahmood, ‘Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?’, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009) 4, pp. 836–862; Charles Taylor, ‘Why we Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism’, in: Eduardo Mendeita and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 34–60.

19 Cf. for an analysis of how the secular and religious as separate domains create different perspectives on the justifiability of violence: William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence, Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

religion are fruitful for analysing the dynamics of contested and contesting frames of meaning.

Transforming and Transformative Perspectives

As mentioned in the introduction of this volume, many scholars speak about a decline of the casual acceptance of religious discourse and related objects in the public and political fields of many western countries. In some countries, Christian ritual performances like baptism, marriage or guided dying are still cherished, often loosely, like in Denmark, while in many other countries, like the UK or The Netherlands, these rituals slowly disappear or are replaced by new modes of secular or spiritual rituals. Linda Woodhead argued that nowadays in the UK, being a—what she calls—‘none’ becomes significant because these ‘nones’ have become the cultural norm. No religion is about ‘I don’t know’.²⁰ However, if ‘none’ becomes significant, what does it signify, how does the ‘I’ that does not know relate ‘not knowing’ to its ‘self’, to ‘the others’ and the world and how does the ‘I’ uses, constructs or iterates frames of understanding and knowledge? And if the ‘I’ does so, why can it not be ‘religious’?

It is not that ‘religion’ has simply ‘less impact’ and thus should be held responsible for people becoming ‘less religious’, nor the other way around. Stacey Gutkowski among other has shown that Christian values as well as the religious/secular divide played a dominant role during British involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.²¹ Soteriological patterns seem to survive its Christian articulations (see also Rieger’s blurring of the boundaries between the political, economic and religious ‘domains’). Thus the meaning of what ‘religion’ is, is unstable, sometimes chaotic. In politics it is identity-related and law-related and in both the public and the academic spheres more often than not treated on the same line with ethnicity and identity. What has changed, is how we perceive ourselves, how we go along with each other, and how we charge events and matter with meaning based on these perceptions. ‘Religion’ has been changed along the lines of this self. In western cultures, frames of the ‘self’ are encouraged as private domain and as responsible and singular authority. A strong emphasis is put on the ‘self’ as constructed by independency,

20 Linda Woodhead, ‘Why ‘no religion’ is the new religion: exploring a major ‘relocation’ using Britain as a case study’, key-note read at: *Relocating Religion*, European Association for the Study of Religion Conference, University of Helsinki, June 28, 2016.

21 Stacey Gutkowski, *Secular War, Myths of Religion, Politics and Violence* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

choice and empowerment through education and development, which is in line with liberal perspectives on society. This emphasis, despite criticism, coincides with ongoing modern perspectives on authority that have influenced western culture especially since the emancipatory movements of the 1960ies and 1970ies. Authority is highly identified with power opposite the free self, creating new perspectives on agency and on the victimization of the self as the 'other' under authoritative control.²² Political parties are continually making efforts to justify how they facilitate the self-empowerment of civilians while at the other side they are treated with distrust and criticized for not representing the 'normal citizen' at the level of politics. In this atmosphere of authority-hysteria, organized religion does not only represent a historic residue but also (past) trajectories of non-communicative authority, fuelled by—for example—media-reports on child abuse in the church. Organized religion is thus standing opposite the autonomy of the individual, sometimes fragilized or victimized self. Woodhead's 'nones' declare independency opposite these authoritative, and often assessed as 'hypocrite' power-structures of organized religion. Religion is in this context often understood as 'private opinion' that should not transgress the clear borders of another's individual autonomy.

As a result of perspectives on the place of organized religion in past and current societies, not at least due to the protection of 'religion' by the law, which sometimes leads to irritations among liberal voters, religion is often taken as a separate field of meaning. Debates on the 'why's' of so-called fundamentalisms for example show how 'religion' is often taken as a reaction to 'modernity' and 'globalization', as a—in Eisenlohr's phrasing—"stress symptom among people who feel threatened". Eisenlohr, Göle and Frederiks show however in their chapters how Islamic communities adapt to new waves of modernity and new flows of globalization, and contribute to these waves and flows. On the other hand does the imagery of the 'free self' (or 'expressive self', as Taylor would have it²³) not automatically contradict 'religious traditions' but also negotiate classic frames of meaning with current perspectives on the self. This is shown by the London evangelicals who combine an individualized attentiveness to listen to the Bible as the Word of God with a shared communal identity that emphasises the individual's personal alignment with God through listening

22 Cf., for instance: Dianne Enns, *The Violence of Victimhood* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), pp. 19–22.

23 Taylor writes about "a generalised culture of 'authenticity', or expressive individualism," of doing your own thing and discover your 'own things'. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 299. Eoin G. Cassidy, 'Transcending Human Flourishing', in: Ian Leask (ed.), *The Taylor Effect, Responding to a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

and hearing, as Strhan shows in her contribution. Individuality is communally stressed. So if we speak about a decline of religion in western societies the question must be asked, beyond the observation of a decline in membership (which is not only due for churches but also for many other institutions that depend on membership like labour unions, political parties, even newspapers etc.) *what* exactly is declining and whether it wouldn't be better to speak about transformations of alignments and the recharging of symbols along the lines of a more individualized self? If so, not 'religion' is declining but what is changing is how we look at ourselves in relation to others and how we strengthen this bond with meaning.

An important trend in western countries that attracts attention from scholars of religion, is the popularity of spiritualities. It can be argued that the authority that is critiqued in external organizations claiming knowledge and morality has been internalized and been transformed in immanent horizons of meaning. In other words, contesting 'religion' is part of a competition about who 'the self' exactly is. Anna King has explored spirituality within counter-cultures of Western societies. She observes how the duality I mentioned above, between authority and the free self can be seen back in the division between 'religion' and 'spirituality'. She writes that if 'religion', "is seen in terms of inherent structures and institutional externals (...) spirituality has become a term that firmly engages with the feminine, with green issues, with ideas of wholeness, creativity, and interdependence, with the interfusion of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the moral".²⁴ Spirituality, in other words, is strongly inscribed into the context of modernity's progression and pursuit of self-development, but, on the other hand, also provides new social (and often commercialized) communities in which this development is facilitated. The 'spiritual' often combines 'things', doctrines and insights from different religions, or provide frames to understand the varieties of religious phenomena within a 'deep knowledge' of human self-development.

The Religious / Secular Divide

In a compelling contribution to this volume, Hirzalla, van Zoonen and Müller show how imaginaries of 'religion' and 'culture' work in reconstructing history

24 Anna King, 'Spirituality: Transformation and Metamorphosis', in: *Religion*, 26 (1996): 345. Although not all these features are present at the same time within the same spirituality, and new spiritualities often show a fusion of Western and Eastern perspectives on the self.

and identity, triggered by two vlogs following Geert Wilders' short movie *Fitna*. They conclude that many sampled comments in their study, "seem to contest the goodness or truthfulness of religions and/or their adherents by means of various historical, exegetical or socio-political allegations or vindications, rather than create some kind of interreligious understanding." Violence, and how violence is justified by 'others', plays a prominent role in public debates that distinguish between 'Islam' and 'the West'. Self-perspectives concur in the image of being 'peaceful', an image that has become dominant in western politics and religion after the Second World War, as Richard Bessel has argued.²⁵

In many western countries there is a 'secular' ambiguity—within but predominantly outside institutionalized religion—that understands 'religion' as something that should be 'private'—a separate 'realm' that should be tight by democratic laws, that, from time to time, fuels primordialist violence and justifies primitive, even barbaric practices on the one hand,²⁶ while on the other hand understands 'religion' as bulwark against selfishism and an insurance of conservative stability producing 'norms' and 'values'. Both sides of this ambiguity promote 'religion' as a separate reality, related to identity, with clear boundaries, as 'something' that protects or should be protected from. As a result, 'religion' or 'the appeal of meaning' is not taken seriously as a constructive force at international levels (for instance during peace negotiations) nor as a force of social, economic or political (trans)formations and change. This misconception of religion and the secular as different, separate realities is critiqued by most scholars of religion²⁷ and by the authors in this volume. Markha Valenta for example writes that religion is widely treated as a special domain that follows from social, economic and political change. In the 'religious/secular' view, religion follows, so to say, other fields and thus is not

25 Richard Bessel shows not only that European identities reconstructed themselves in the image of peaceful societies, but also that 'being at the good side' plays a magnificent role in this reconstruction. He speaks, with historian Tony Judt, about 'a comforting amnesia', "that allowed Europeans to focus on the violence done to them while conveniently forgetting the violence done to others". Richard Bessel, *Violence, A Modern Obsession* (London, New York etc.: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 278.

26 Cf., among many others: Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words, The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2005), p. 18; Daniel Chirot, *Contentious Identities, Ethnic, Religious, and Nationalist Conflicts in Today's World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 4–5; Peter Conzen, *Fanatismus, Psychoanalyse eines unheimlichen Phänomens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), p. 9; Bob de Graaff, *Op weg naar Armageddon, De evolutie van fanatisme* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2012), p. 18.

27 Cf.: Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion, An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Boston, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).

treated very seriously in studies on—for example—urban life, social change or international relations. Often, religion is mentioned in one breath with ‘ethnicity’ and ‘identity’. Rieger’s hypothesis follows contrary to this view the blurring of the boundaries of ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ as he states that “certain manifestations of religion have more in common with certain manifestations of economics and politics than with other manifestations of religion”. Indeed, as he argues in his chapter dealing with ‘meaning’ as promoted in the context of the current liberal economy, “the definition of religion operative (...) is tied to the promotion of big ideas and values, which takes place independent of empirical assessments of concrete situations and unaffected by scientific critique”. What difference can be acknowledged in this sense between ‘religion’ and ‘economics’, Rieger asks. The contributors in this volume show, beyond the understanding of ‘religion’ as simply an identity-constructing force or a realm separate from the secular, that religion migrates to and immigrates into other discursive fields where it articulates different modalities of meaning. Meaning ‘crawls’ into matter while matter charges meaning and becomes contested. Valenta shows for example how a Catholic place filled with marvel travels through Amsterdam while becoming smaller and smaller. Its debris is continually but often indirectly contested as signs of (feared or teased) religious power in the public space. But this journey into oblivion not only follows the quarrel between Protestants and Catholics, but also shows—what Valenta calls—‘urban desire’, which she brings back to its very basics of the desire to belong and to make a city your home. Home is, as Camp also shows in her contribution, strongly related to place and meaning. This is an interesting notion that might alarm us about new notions of ‘religion’ that lean (too) heavily on identity and spirituality (which is based, as I have argued, on changing perceptions of the self). The desire to be, to belong and to be at home; does this not function as the very heart of meaning? This, again, would contest the political and public uses of the term ‘religion’ and blur the boundaries of this word, but also and most of all contest the all too forced divisions between the secular and the religious, the public and the private. Meaning, in this sense, draws desires to be and to be in relation to homes (Camp), places (Göle, Valenta), people (Duynand, Frederiks), histories, ideas (van de Belt, Hirzala, van Zoonen and Müller) and endings (Pippin).

Contested and Contesting Islam

One of the greatest challenges to the discursive and judicial division between the religious and the secular is the presence of Muslims in western countries, especially in Europe. In this volume, Islam is studied from different

perspectives: Göle shows a contested and changing Islam in European public space. She pays attention to Islam as public gesture that challenges the secular 'private'. Frederiks shows how the doll Fulla is promoted "to embody Arab ideals of Islamic womanhood in the 21st century". Arab ideals are communicated through a commercialized doll. Frederiks' contribution does not situate Fulla in the secular-religious divide, but in the much wider context of commercialization and the globalization of meaning. Hirzalla, van Zoomen and Müller study how imageries of 'the secular' and 'Islam' are communicated in internet-postings responding to different vlogs on Islam. In all these contributions, Islam is implicitly or explicitly contesting and contested. Due to this, Islamic 'identities' cannot be understood as entities, but are reconstructed and remodelled along this process. If Fulla promotes Arabic ideals, how does Fulla modify these ideals?

This also works the other way around. Göle writes that the premises of European public life are challenged and contested by religious and cultural difference. Migration has impact on several levels of identity-formation. Classical chains of transmission of religious knowledge are broken, she argues. Classically structured religious authorities are losing grip on migrant Muslim communities in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Due to migration, the classical infra-structure of religious authority changes. A great challenge to religious studies in this context is the continuing civil wars in the Syria and Iraq. The enormous flow of Syrian, Iraqi and African refugees as a result of violence and economic decrease, creates unrest in Turkey, Lebanon and the European Union, and leads to enormous political and economic transformations, from negotiations between Turkey and the EU on Turkey's membership to the fear for refugees which became evident during the Brexit campaign leading to Great Britain's exit from the EU in June 2016. Questions of how to deal with the enormous inflow of refugees, how these refugees will have access to the labour-market and how they will demographically and religiously transform the secular landscape, are important questions that have—in a demagogically modified way—dominated many populist agendas throughout the EU. New political movements and parties mobilize themselves around symbols of national identity opposite the threat of 'newcomers', from the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria to *Front National* in France to *Legha Nord* in Italy to the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* in The Netherlands to *Alternative für Deutschland* and PEGIDA in Germany etc. 'Religion' certainly is part of the fear as well as it triggers the imagery of a violent Islam that, opposite human rights and often 'Christian values',²⁸ emancipation and gay-rights, conquers the public space. In

28 Cf. for example: Ernst van den Hemel, 'The Noble Lie: 'Judeo-Christian Roots' and the Rise of Dutch Neo-Conservatism', in: Rosi Braidotti, E Midden & T de Graauw (Eds.),

public discourses, 'Islam' is often positioned opposite the secular-democratic imagery of tolerance, free speech, self-development and human rights, functioning as a projected cluster of what 'we' do not want to be,²⁹ which comes also to the fore in the chapter on vlogs and postings from Hirzalla, van Zoonen and Müller in this volume and in Göle's chapter on public prayer. What is at stake is that 'religion' is seen as 'something' that transgresses the secular boundaries meant to keep 'religious convictions' into the private sphere. In this situation, a headscarf becomes more than a headscarf, a prayer more than a 'religious ritual', as Göle shows. Precisely this 'more' links the many uses of 'religion' and 'Islam' back to the contexts in which these words are given meaning and extends the field of religious studies to the study of contesting and contested meaning, including the meaning of the self, autonomy, boundaries, spaces and the private. For what kind of 'religion' is at work when an employee is fired because she is wearing a headscarf?³⁰ She is not preaching the truth of what she believes. Neither is she asking her customers what they believe about God. She is just doing her job like anyone else and does what she is asked to do. She is, however, wearing a headscarf which implicitly transgresses the boundaries of the private self and is indeed understood as a testimonium against this self. What 'religion' is at work when a patient refuses treatment by a medical specialist in a hospital because the latter wears a headscarf.³¹ The client motivates her decision by referring to the idea that a headscarf represents the repression of women in Islam and the harsh non-emancipatory attitude of male-dominated Islam. For her, the headscarf opened up a cultural archive of emancipatory trajectories and mediatic representations of violence against women in the Middle East. Exactly this 'protest' against the visibility of 'religion' in the public space opens up horizons of meaning, of appeal and of 'how we go along with each other' that should be studied by scholars of religion. How is meaning constructed and why and when are meanings clashing? How crawls one meaning into another by becoming visible? How are discourses on meaning charged by historical trajectories and political and social currents?

Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

- 29 Cf.: Lucien van Lier, 'Teasing islam—Islam as the other side of tolerance in contemporary Dutch politics', in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29 (2014) 2, pp. 187–202.
- 30 Nu.nl: 'Hema ontsloeg vrouw met hoofddoek onterecht', at: <http://www.nu.nl/buitenland/2994871/hema-ontsloeg-vrouw-met-hoofddoek-onterecht.html>, (date accessed: 11-07-2016).
- 31 Joop.nl, 'Haatpatiënte weigert door moslima arts geholpen te worden', at: <http://www.joop.nl/nieuws/haatpatiente-weigert-door-moslim-geholpen-te-wordsen>, (date accessed: 11-07-2016).

What impact does language have on the mediation of meaning, how are things charged by meaning and how is meaning changed by things? How does 'meaning' become implicit; how where and why does it habitualize in whom and what?

The challenge to and of religious studies will be how 'travelling meaning' contests and is contested, becomes labelled as 'religious' or 'cultural', touches upon imageries of how we go along with each other, imageries of norms and values that mediate and negotiate itself and the other, constructs and reconstructs discourses and materials in a strongly globalizing world where 'Jesus' can be 'as real as' any other person, where 'the Bible speaks', where Karbala becomes 'here and now', where 'human rights' are the ontology of humanity, where self-development defines the 'I' who is 'as real' as the world it lives in, maybe even 'more' real, and where meaning travels and disseminates through dolls, vlogs, postings, debris, bodies and the Body. Meaning travels and as it travels contests and is contested, changes and is changed, but always remaining 'real'. For as Jesus is 'real', so is Muhammed, so are human rights, so is the self and so are the good tidings of economic prosperity. As people believe words and things to be real, so are the consequences of this 'believe'. These questions concerning the visibility of meaning, its frames, its contesting and contested promises, and above all, how meaning mediates and transforms, must be the field in which religious studies will have to develop.

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