

Contesting Religious Identities

Transformations, Disseminations and Mediations

Edited by

Bob Becking
Anne-Marie Korte
and Lucien van Liere



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Contesting Religious Identities: An Introduction

Anne-Marie Korte & Lucien van Liere

A teenager praying in a public school in Germany; a girl, converted to Islam, losing her job due to negative responses from shoppers on her headscarf in Belgium; another girl refusing to take off her headscarf in a Catholic school in The Netherlands, summoning her school before the law; a young boy claiming his rights to pray in the public space in Germany; young western Buddhists meditating during rush-hour at Utrecht Central Station in The Netherlands; young English Muslims killing an English soldier in the streets of London, asking passers-by to record their statements; popular parties gaining votes through anti-Islamic discourses throughout Europe; young European Muslims travelling to Syria to join a jihad against al-Assad; public and political disputes on ritual slaughter and the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa into European countries, 'religion' is often at the very heart of public and political issues and debates.

'Religion' is certainly a hot topic on the public stages of 'secular' societies, not in its individualized liberal or orthodox form, but rather as a public statement, using modern social media like twitter, YouTube and face-book and challenging the long cherished divide between the secular neutral space and the religious. In this new challenging modus, religion raises questions about identity, power, rationality, subjectivity, law and safety, but above all: religion questions, contests and even blurs the borders between the public and the private, making these borders more fluid and the presuppositions of contemporary societies loose-limbed. These phenomena urge to rethink what are often considered to be clear differences between religions, between the public and the private and between the religious and the secular.

'Religion' certainly is widely discussed, disputed and contested in different domains of society, including law, medicine and international relations. Some argue about a 'post-secularity',¹ a 'secular religion'² or speak about a 'return of

1 Giuseppe Giordan and Enzo Pace 'Introduction: Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World', in: G. Giordan and E. Pace, *Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World* (The Hague, Boston: Brill, 2012); Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', in: *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (2008) 4.

2 Stuckrad, Kocku von, 'Secular Religion: A Discourse-historical Approach to Religion in Contemporary Western Europe', in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 28 (2013), pp. 1–14.

religion',³ but *how* religion returns, *what kind* of religion returns and *to what* religion returns remains often unclear, while exactly this vagueness of 'what' returns, opens up the possibility to re-think the dynamics and energies that come along with discursive practices of what is called 'faith', 'belief' or simply: 'religion'. Religion seems not 'to be something' that re-turns, or re-presents itself after a 'secular age' (which would rather be a reification), but seems much more a (re-)linkage of people with (established, renewed or new) practices, texts, movements, figures, things, disputes, shrines, rituals etc. To understand this development, it is necessary to understand the shifting contexts in which religious practices (re)appear and how this 'shifting' relates to these practices. This book, based on the conference 'Contesting Religious Identities' that was organized at Utrecht University in 2010, contributes to this understanding by describing processes of religious (re)interpretation as related to specific contexts and has a sharp focus on the impact of contestation within these processes.

Contesting and Contested Religious Identities

In western contexts, since the beginning of the 21st Century, issues of religious identity-formation have become increasingly manifest in political and cultural landscapes. Religious identities of cultures, subcultures, groups and individuals are being seriously contested in social and political domains. On the other hand vigorous religious identities are contesting established 'modern' discourses that take secularity for granted. The revival of Islam as a religious culture as well as a political stance has raised new questions about the historical and actual role of Christianity in the Western world, about discourses on 'Christian culture' and about the idea of 'the West'. New stereotypes of Muslims follow age-old patterns⁴ while at the same time national and continental borders are blurred and new senses of belonging develop in often self-conflicting ways. 'Eastern-orientated' spiritualities in the West raise questions about old worldviews, linking to western constructions of the 'self'. Religion fluids across well-established national and cultural borders. A fresh understanding of the

3 Enda McCaffrey, *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo, *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2012).

4 Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims, Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

ways in which these fluid religious identities are shaped, (re)invented and (re)appropriated within shifting cultural and political frameworks and how (re)invention and (re)appropriation is linked with older theological representations, is clearly needed.

Religion in Different Spaces and Different Roles

To understand how religion ‘works’ in today’s world, this subject surely cannot be seen isolated as an independent variable and studied on its own terms. Why particular religious identities are emphasized, claimed, acted out, contested and contesting, individually as well as collectively, has become a main question that can only be answered by crossing and combining disciplines and approaches. The significance of religion in the global context has become ever more apparent beyond the confines of the classic academic disciplines of theology and religious studies. The necessity of understanding how religion intersects and interacts with other social, political, and economic discourses has not only moved to the fore of academic, but also of public consciousness and of public media.

Religions play also different roles in the postcolonial context in which cultures and traditions are resisting the incursion of Western political, economic, and social values. It (re)energizes revolutionary social potentialities, theological discourses as plain perspectives on current issues or it merges with ethnic or national identities. This state of affairs brings along a new urgency, not only to the study of the construction of religious identities in past and present, but also an urgency to re-search the actual role religion(s) play(s) in the formations of identities, cohesions, affiliations, and solidarities. This requires an investigation of the status of religion in its complex relationship to cultural diversity, social allegiances, networks of resistance and (inter)national canons, but also a thorough research of the meaning of religious representations as linked to their theological traditions.

Religion, Identity Formation and Social Interaction

‘Identity’ is a popular word in social sciences and humanities alike. Since the sixties of the twentieth Century, ‘identity’ has become an enigmatic word referring to a ‘deep self’ that construes and is construed by different historical, cultural and religious layers. ‘Identity’ became an important political marker to indicate specific policies towards minorities in the West, especially minorities

with religion-based practices. Although many theorists have criticised 'identity' as a 'fixed and solid' cognitive frame, like structuralists and postmodernists,⁵ the word is still used in political contexts as a de-individualized, deterministic designator for the incommensurability of different cultural lifestyles.⁶ On the other hand, 'identity' has become a word for hard-style religious and ethnic practices that affirm a certain origin, election or destiny.⁷

In this book, identity is conceived as a dialectical process in which individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others. Identity is thus the condensed and temporal product of various forms of representation in a specific (global) context at a specific place (who you are and where you are, are closely interwoven). Moreover, it always expresses a relation because such representations involve the ongoing construing of differences and similarities between 'us' and 'them' according to multiple markers such as gender, politics, arts, ethnic origins, and indeed: religion. Following recent developments in the conceptualization of identity, individual identities are understood as multi-layered and situational,⁸ that is, capable of shifting in the light of the context in which they are (re-)constructed. The migration of people, cultural products and representations continuously provide people with new prospects to re-define themselves and rethink their habits of identifying others, sometimes by developing a new loyalty to what they now see as their distinctive 'roots.' In this situation the manifestation and construction of religious identities receives various new incentives as well as new challenges. Traditional and established religions become reconstructed and appropriated in diverging forms: from the frozenness of conservative religion to the openness of syncretistic bricolage. Religious identities are representations produced, reproduced, transformed and brought into circulation through all kinds of media. They involve ideas about the self and the social,⁹ about origin and destination, belonging and direction, which are shaped by stories, images, things and rituals. Moreover, religion is not only instrumental in identity-formation by shaping and spread-

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, Oxford, Malden: Polity Press), pp. 82–87.

6 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular, Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 159–172; Timothy J. Reiss, *Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

7 Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity, A Study of Bloody Conflicts* (Charlottesville: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006).

8 Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

9 Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (eds), *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2010).

ing such ideas; it is itself an important marker of identity in the sense that adherence to particular sense-making practices (language, traditions, religious beliefs and so on) is often used as a criterion for distinguishing between groups and for identifying an individual with one group rather than another. These discursive practices on the 'we' and the 'them' of religious identities are part and parcel of contemporary disputes on the place of religion in the public space.

Building on these insights into the historical and cultural production of religious identities, the question rises how the energy of this production is fed by, and has impact on social interactions: on processes of integration and marginalisation, of inclusion and exclusion, of conflict, misunderstandings and new ways of community-building across social, religious, linguistic, and ethnic borders. By studying the interplay between religion, identity formation and social interactions in the past and in the present and by reflecting theoretically on that interplay, by combining reflections on the appearance of religion in public spaces and theological linkages that has impact on performative religious stances, this book aims to address the importance of religion as a *constituting factor* of discourses on cultures and on cultural identities.

Three Clusters

Studying religion as it presents itself and taking this self-presentation as a constituting factor of cultural discourses and visibilities demands a re-research of religion along different social fields and domains. In this book, we indicate three different thematic clusters that are interconnected at several layers but are nevertheless distinguishable. These three clusters focus on specific dialectical relations between fixed and movable constituting elements of religious identities: territories *and* diasporas; texts *and* media; bodies *and* rituals. The clusters contain articles that search for the changing visibilities of religious presences along different social fields and how these presences change the way 'religion' can be understood.

The first cluster of the book ('Territories and Diasporas') has a focus on shifting contexts of meaning and religious actions and responses in which 'movement' is seen as a formative element of religion, crossing borders of global politics, media and sciences. Territories and diasporas, the notion of 'being here' and longing for 'there', is a constituting frame to understand the (re)constructions and contestations of religious 'identities' and concepts of religion as they are transformed, adapted, cherished, reinstalled, or defended

by movement(s). Interestingly, theological perspectives appear as frames to understand new global developments. Whether 'movement' is forced (as diaspora), voluntarily, or only digital, it contributes to the production and reproduction of meaning and touches strongly upon theological understandings of who and where 'we' are. Movement in this context is part and parcel of contestation.

The second cluster ('Texts and Media') addresses the profiles and styles of religion in media and (holy) texts. Creative formations as well as apocalyptic destructions are inherent to most religions and have an enormous impact on interpretations of current affairs. This cluster searches the borders between religious imaginations, texts and media and their conflation with social realities that are continually formed and re-formed.

The third and last session of this book ('Bodies and Rituals') investigates religion's ambiguous role from within the cluster of 'bodies and rituals', addressing the role of religion within the context of corporality. In this section the question will be discussed how religious identities are shaped, (re)invented and appropriated in embodiment, performance and (ritual) enactment, or, more shortly put, by 'corporeal entanglement'. In particular, the questions how religious identities are contested in and by bodily forms, symbols, acts, and performances, and why certain aspects of bodily appearance and existence momentarily seem to be more fit or prone than others to figure in this type of conflict and profiling, are addressed. While some young Muslims, for instance, use the ritual stands of their bodies as a public statement of their faith, others see their physical statements as a contestation of fundamental values. The body seems to have become the symbolic battlefield between the secular and the religious.

These three sections have a separate introductory article in which the theme of the volume is explored with a focus on these specific topics. Contributors come from a range of different disciplines. Because 'religion' is contested as well as it is contesting identities in the public space, the study of religion is not limited anymore to the discipline of religious studies or theology. Religion has become a phenomenon that needs to be scrutinized from different academic fields. The specific place of 'religious studies' as part of the Humanities elaborates not only the new specific role religion plays in contemporary societies but reflects also the need to understand 'religion' not as an isolated phenomenon but as a dynamics, that shapes and reshapes cultural frames of knowledge and behaviour.

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