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THE LABEL OF 'RELIGION'

MIGRATION AND ASCRIPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES
IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE



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THE LABEL OF 'RELIGION':
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ABSTRACT

This working paper presents three perspectives on the ways in which a labeling of social actors, processes, or conflicts as 'religion' or 'religious' plays a central role in disputes about migration and identity-formation in contemporary Europe. From the perspective of world society theory, the examples discussed here could be interpreted in regard to the concept of 'responsivity', i.e. responses inside a particular function system like religion to expectations and developments in other societal functions systems.

Labeling processes strongly affect the ways in which migrant religions are incorporated in a new context. **Rafaëla Eulberg's** section of the working paper shows the impact of such processes of ascription in the context of refugee immigration, in particular the incorporation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Switzerland. A characteristic of the first years of Tamil Hindu migration to Switzerland was a dynamic interplay between the South Asian Hindus and Swiss Hindu converts. In the early 1980s, the temple of the "International Society for Krishna Consciousness" (ISKCON) in Zurich became a particularly important contact zone, in which contrary labeling processes influenced the encounter of Krishna devotees and Tamil migrants. A second example shows how labeling processes act as invisible builders of sacred architecture. The recent overall image of immigrant groups had an influence on differing tower politics within Swiss political discourses. There were striking differences between the perception of the existing four minarets in Switzerland and the newly erected Hindu temple tower in Trimbach.

Annika Jacobsen's section addresses the situation of Arabic refugees in Germany with regard to their ascribed and self-reported religious identities on the basis of empirical data accumulated in Hamburg. 'Religion' plays a prominent role in the public discourse about the settlement of refugees in Germany, especially when concerned with a group among them that is largely identified as 'Arabic' due to their outward appearance. Jacobsen highlights the ascription of religious labels and the conditions for their switching with other labels to point to the possible influence these dynamics may have on the integration of refugees. Her qualitative interviews demonstrate the diversity of refugees' self-identified religious belonging (some of them being Muslim, some self-proclaimed "believers" and some atheists) and the generally moderate role religion plays in their everyday lives. What most of them had in common, however, were experiences with members of the host-society in which they were ascribed a Muslim identity that was often linked to a dogmatic or fundamentalist image of Islam. All of the interview partners felt equally frustrated and stigmatized by these ascriptions. Jacobsen explores how these dynamics influence refugees' stances towards religion and the host-society by making reference to the history of the discourse about Turkish "guest workers" in Germany. Another dispute about the labeling of religion can be observed in the establishment of refugee accommodations in Hamburg as 'neutral spaces' in which the categories of 'religion' and 'culture' are employed by the camp staff to either dismiss or justify certain practices and symbols within camp life.

Petra Tillessen explores the role of labeling something as 'religion' or 'religious' in mediation, a booming field in dealing with interpersonal conflicts. But how can 'religious dimensions' in such conflicts be dealt with and what can the academic study of religion/s contribute to mediation? In the existing mediation literature, "religion" is frequently presented as a unique phenomenon, a very special and difficult thing to deal with. It is mostly seen as a stable and closed entity – at least as far as individuals are concerned. As religious convictions are seen as hardly ne-

gotiable, it is often recommended to deal with them e.g. by translating “religious” questions into other “social languages”. It is therefore precisely in the preparation of mediators for ‘religious dimensions’ of conflicts, that demarcations or differences could be inadvertently strengthened. A combination of the expertise of the academic study of religion with the expertise of mediation training programs could possibly allow the development of new practical assignments for a religion-sensitive mediation. Recent approaches in the study of religion/s focus on the diversity, plurality, and flexibility of religions. Drawing on these approaches might allow us to develop an understanding of ‘flexible facts’ about religion/s as an orientation for mediation processes. This could also serve as the theoretical backdrop for the development of new practical assignments. Tillessen presents three examples of this work in progress: “My Groups”, “Labels”, and the Simulation game “You As a Muslim...”.

INTRODUCTION

ADRIAN HERMANN

This working paper consists of three sections (written by Rafaela Eulberg, Annika Jacobsen, and Petra Tillessen) on labeling processes of migrants in contemporary Europe and the ways in which these could be analyzed from a religion studies perspective.

While the three authors do not make use of this concept themselves, the research they present could be understood as dealing with examples of what Rudolf Stichweh (2015) and David Kaldewey et al. (2015) have called the *responsivity of function systems*: the responses inside a particular societal system like religion to expectations and developments in other functions systems of world society. Taking up this idea, asking for instances of the responsivity of religion in the form of an interaction between religion and politics, law, or the mass media, means asking what specific reactions the religion system of society develops in order to respond to perceived challenges in its environment. How does religion learn from this engagement, how are external challenges, expectations, and demands reformulated in religious communication? Responsivity can therefore be understood as the way in which the religion system of world society reacts to dynamically changing societal conditions.

In her section of the working paper, Eulberg describes how Sri Lankan Tamil migrants were first welcomed by the Krishna devotees of the Swiss ISKCON temple in Zurich. The presence of 'authentic' South Asian Hindus in the temple was seen as a positive step towards countering the stereotype of ISKCON as a dangerous "youth sect" that the larger Swiss society had established in regard to this community. Later, in the midst of disagreements between the Swiss devotees and the Sri Lankans, one ISKCON member is reported to have said that the presence of too many "black" Tamils might anger right-wing radicals, hinting at a potentially developing political opposition that the temple could face. The religious actors here reacted to what they perceived as external expectations coming e.g. from the political system in regard to their own societal status and reacted in a specifically religious way, by at first looking to invite adherents of an 'authentic' Hindu tradition into their midst. When problems arose, the presence of the Tamils in the temple was not only problematized in terms of external challenges, like the attitudes of other (political) actors to the group, but, as Eulberg describes, in religious terms as well, as the Tamils were described pejoratively as ritualistically "religious" in contrast to the "spiritual" Western devotees. In what she describes as "tower politics", Eulberg highlights the ways in which Tamil migrants' projects of temple building were influenced by political and media debates about Muslim minarets. After the Swiss ban on the building of new minarets in 2009, the plans for the building of Hindu temple towers in Trimbach and Dürnten were discussed by the Tamil migrants and partly adjusted in order not to run into conflicts with the neighbors.

In Jacobsen's research into refugees in Germany being labeled as "Muslim" (regardless of their self-reported religious affiliation) by the media as well as actors within civil society and even in interpersonal relations, she describes the potential development of an identification with a "cultural Islam" even for non-Muslim refugees. In solidarity with the discriminated Muslims, some of those refugees – who before their migration to Germany did not identify as Muslim – are attending mosques as spaces of social interaction, show increased interest in Islam, and develop elements of a pan-Islamic identity beyond ethnic forms of belonging. A potentially developing "cultural Islam" in Europe, based on a feeling of "belonging without believing" (Davie 1990), might be one of the responses within the religious system to the increased Islamophobic tendencies in European societies.

Even Tillessen's proposal for a religion-sensitive mediation, which she presents as the theoretical background to the development of three hands-on-exercises in the education of conflict managers, could be interpreted from the perspective of responsiveness. Not only is the development of a 'practical' or 'applied' study of religion a case of responsiveness similar to what Kaldewey et al. (2015) describe (but of course this might be considered a response in the science/education systems rather than a response in the system of religion). Moreover, the multireligious identities that Tillessen wants to include in her exercises can themselves be seen not just as an analytical category developed in religious studies, but also as a way in which communication in the religious system of world society is restructuring itself beyond the assumptions of stable and different world religious identities, which characterized the system's dominating semantics in the 19th and through much of the 20th century. We can find an adoption of such self-descriptions both in contemporary Christianity as well as in Buddhism in the West, for example.

The three sections of this working paper were first presented as part of a panel on "Labeling Religion: Migration and Ascriptions of Religious Identities in Contemporary Europe" [1] that the Department for Religion Studies of the Forum Internationale Wissenschaft organized at the 16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), held in Bern, Switzerland, from June 17–21, 2018. The general topic of the conference was "Multiple Religious Identities". All texts have been heavily revised. A response to the three presentations of the panel was given by Giovanni Maltese and will be published separately as FIW Working Paper 12.

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[1] In this working paper, the concepts of "labeling" and "ascription" which are used by the three authors in their texts below are not always clearly distinguished or explored in detail in regard to their theoretical foundations. Further reflections on these terms could start e.g. with what Steffen Führding (2015) has called the "socio-rhetorical approach" in the study of religion and an analysis of processes of "classification" as political acts.

1. CONTACT ZONES AND TOWER POLITICS: LABELING PROCESSES AND THE INCORPORATION OF TAMIL HINDUS IN SWITZERLAND

RAFAELA EULBERG

Labeling processes strongly affect the way that migrant religions are incorporated in a new context. [2] In his book *The Hindu Diaspora* Steven Vertovec points out that diverse contextual factors shape the life of Hindu migrants and lead to a wide range of specificities: “Hindu socio-religious phenomena and the identities of Hindu people from place to place outside India [the Indian Subcontinent, R.E.] are often highly unlike each other, having travelled along diverse historical trajectories conditioned by a wide range of locally contextual factors” (Vertovec 2000: 1). This section of the working paper shows the potency of labeling processes and their impact in the context of refugee immigration. Specifically, it presents examples of how they have influenced the incorporation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Switzerland. [3]

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The reason for Tamil Hindu migration to Switzerland in the beginning was the Sri Lankan civil war (official duration from 1983 to 2009). The so-called “Eelam Wars” were not only a local South Asian affair but also a transnational phenomenon with a strong international dimension. As a result of the armed conflict between Sri Lankan Armed Forces and the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE), who claimed a monopoly position in the field of the Tamil resistance movements, approximately 800,000 Tamils were displaced all over the world.

The following working paper section opens with an overview of the dynamics of ascription processes towards Tamil migrants in Switzerland and how the stereotypes on Tamils changed during recent years. The first section highlights that after negative stereotyping of Tamil immigration in the beginning, a positive change in the image of Tamil migrants took place. A third shift within in the public perception was caused by current developments: Parts of the majority society express their irritation about drastic measures within public Tamil activism. The main part of my text concentrates on the impact of labeling processes on Tamil Hindus, as the majority religious actors of this migrant group. These dynamics will be demonstrated by two examples: I will show how contrary labeling processes influenced the encounter of long-established Krishna devotees and Tamil migrants in the temple of the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness” (ISKCON) in Zurich in the beginning of Tamil migration to Switzerland. On the one hand, Tamils were embraced as part of the Hinduization of ISKCON, but on the other hand, xenophobic discours-

[2] This part of the working paper can be used as a reference model, for example, for research on ascription processes towards Arabic refugees that the second section of the working paper presents.

[3] The following is based on the results of my ethnography-based dissertation project on Hindu traditions within the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Switzerland, which was embedded in the Swiss National Research Program “Religious Communities, State and Society” sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The thesis with the title “New Places for the Gods. Dynamics of Localization of Tamil Hindu Practices in Switzerland in the Context of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu Diaspora” was successfully defended at the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Lucerne (Switzerland) in March 2018.

es could be observed. Tamil visitors were attributed religious otherness: they were perceived as “religious” in contrast to the highly rated “spiritual” practices of the established Krishna devotees. My second example demonstrates how labeling processes act as invisible builders of sacred architecture. The public discourse on Muslim migrants has effects on other immigrant religions as well; I will highlight how attitudes towards Muslim sacred buildings have affected the dynamics of Hindu temple building, especially in the construction of the first South Asian style temple in Switzerland.

Stereotyping Sri Lankan Tamil Migrants in Switzerland: The Dynamics of Ascription Processes

08

An important condition of incorporation – or to put it in Yasmin Soysal’s words, a part of the “incorporation regime” –, besides for example immigration policy, is the public opinion about Tamil immigrants. “All states develop a set of legal rules, discursive practices, and organizational structures that define the status of foreigners vis-à-vis the host state, and the forms and boundaries of their participation in host policy institutions” (Soysal 1994: 32). In the ascription processes towards Tamil migrants three phases can be observed:

In the beginning, negative stereotyping was the dominant labeling process (first phase): A xenophobic mood was accompanied by a “media campaign without equal” against Tamils (Bundesamt für Migration 2007: 39). There were also racist attacks on Tamil refugees. Martin Stürzinger, country expert Sri Lanka of the Swiss refugee aid, who outlined in detail the Swiss asylum policy towards Tamil refugees in his study *Mapping the Sri Lankan Diaspora in Switzerland* (2002) describes the xenophobic social climate in relation to Tamil immigrants as follows: “Tamil jokes made the rounds, [...] in many places skinheads beat Tamils up. Especially in Bern, where by far the highest number of asylum applications had been made by Tamils, fights arose again and again after refugee events” (Stürzinger 2002: 23).

The positive changes in this image over the following years might also have been influenced by changes within the migrant groups’ demographic composition (second phase): While most Tamil migrants in the beginning were men, the migration of more and more spouses and family members to Switzerland in the 1990s might have affected the public opinion. Gender stereotyping interfered with existing stereotypes about ‘foreigners’. The image of the ‘strange black man’ was slowly replaced with an image of the ‘industrious and inconspicuous Tamil family’. In the public opinion, Tamil migrants now appeared as “model immigrants” (Stolz 2000: 13), an impression shaped by the idea that in comparison to other migrant groups, like Muslim migrants, they ‘cause less trouble’. Additionally, a change in the public perception of Tamil Hindu practices could be observed. More and more public expressions of Tamil Hindu religiosity were seen as exotic attractive events by the majority population.

The third shift took place during the escalation of the armed conflict at the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka 2009 and in the following years (third phase): Tamil diaspora activists reacted against the situation of Tamils in Sri Lanka with protest campaigns; parts of the Swiss public expressed surprise about occasional drastic measures like the self-immolation of a young Tamil in front of the UN building in Geneva on 26.02.2009 or, in rare cases, violent demonstrations of these so-called ‘calm’ and ‘peaceful’ immigrants.

These remarks show the fluidity of the public perception of (Tamil) migrants. The following examples concentrate on how different labeling processes have influenced the incorpora-

tion of Tamil Hindus in Switzerland. Whereas Christian Tamils were able to connect to the long-established Christian institutions in Switzerland, the Hindu majority did not have this option. There was no prior history of South Asian migration due to the lack of a colonial past of Switzerland and no 'twice migrants' who practiced Hindu traditions – in contrast for example to the popular receiving country Great Britain. Most of the Sri Lankan Tamils identify themselves as *Saivites* whose religious practices are centered around the worship of *Cīva* (skr. *Śiva*) and his family. Swiss Neo-Hindu groups were the only anchor points that had any connection to their religious practice. Since the late 1960s, "Hindu-related new religious movements" such as the Hare-Krishna-Movement had established themselves in Switzerland. During this time their public perception was characterized by labeling discourses about these groups as "youth sects" and "cults". [4]

Example I: Contact Zones – Labeling Processes Within the ISKCON Temple

A characteristic of the first years of Tamil Hindu migration to Switzerland was a dynamic interplay between the South Asian Hindus and Swiss Hindu converts. In particular, the temple of the "International Society for Krishna Consciousness" (ISKCON) in Zurich became an important "contact zone" in the early 1980s. According to Mary Louise Pratt, this concept describes a "social space where cultures meet, dash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1992: 7). In the ISKCON temple, contrary labeling processes influenced the interactions of Krishna devotees and Tamil migrants, reflecting exclusionary tendencies and a paternalistic attitude.

On the one hand Tamils were welcomed as part of the *Hinduization* of ISKCON: Besides the ISKCON-internal discussions about the inclusion and exclusion of the Tamil devotees, the presence of South Asian Hindus in the ISKCON temple in Zurich served to counter the perception of ISKCON as a "youth sect". The public image of the movement was shaped by the sect discourse in the 1980s (Neubert 2010a: 60). In the 1970s harsh reactions by the majority population towards the movement have been reported. So-called "sect commissioners" warned against the group as a dangerous cult. As a reaction, the Swiss Society for Krishna Consciousness (SGKB) tried to present itself as an authentic Hindu community through contacts with Indian and Sri Lankan Hindus. The presence of South Asian devotees in the temple was expected to mitigate negatively attributed ascriptions. Their goal was to be perceived as a traditional "world religion" that has been native to Asia for millennia. E. Burke Rochford (2007: 181ff.) refers to this process as the "Hinduization" of ISKCON.

On the other hand, xenophobic discourses toward the newly-arriving Tamil visitors arose within the Krishna temple in Zurich. A Swiss ISKCON priest and former vice president of the Swiss Tamil Krishna Society, who acted as a contact person and interface between Western *kr̥ṣṇa*-devotees and Tamil visitors in the early days of Tamil immigration to Switzerland, reports:

[...] in the beginning they came and the Swiss here have been a bit afraid. [...] So a bit of the racist shined through, I had the feeling. We had big meetings here. The topic came up: So many Tamils, what are we doing? And then one suggested / we say / they come only on Saturday. And on Sunday we have our program. And another said: "We should be reserved, because when so many blacks are here, then we get problems with the right-wing radicals." [5]

[4] The establishment of neo-Hindu movements in Switzerland began with the Shri Ramakrishna Math, founded by the Indian Reform-Hindu Vivekananda (1863–1902): Monks of this Math had established the first Swiss Ashram in the 1930s. In the 1950s the Centre Védantique was opened in Geneva, which today still promotes Vivekananda's teachings.

The ascription of Tamils as *blacks* refers to racist othering processes within the scope of social construction processes of “whiteness versus blackness”. Within the predominantly “white” temple community Tamil practitioners were regarded as internal strangers. In addition, Tamil Hindu practice was labeled as “religious” in contrast to the higher-valued “spiritual” practices of the long-established Krishna devotees of the temple. In the same interview the already mentioned Swiss Krishna devotee explains:

Because most of the Tamils are *religious* / but not necessarily *spiritual*. They visit the temple, because they want a good family / they go to the temple, because they want to be rich / because they want to be happy. The Swiss or Westerner is coming here because he wants spiritual experience. That is why we established a special Tamil Sunday feast. [6]

Spirituality is used here as a demarcation term in relation to religion. The topoi *religious* and *spiritual* are used as a contrasting pair to attribute different needs to Tamil and Western devotees. Tamils are described as a homogeneous group that is led by materialist motives and is highly family oriented. The western devotees are seen as the superior group with serious spiritual demands. [7] One effect of these labeling processes was the division of the ISKCON Sunday festival into a “normal” and a Tamil one, which took place before the “normal” Sunday Festival. “Contact zones” are shaped by interactive processes: negotiations within the organizational structures of the temple led to structural changes and the founding of a new association, the *Swiss Tamil Krishna Society* (STKS), established in 1991 as a subgroup of the ISKCON, the organizer of the Tamil Sunday festival.

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Example II: Tower politics – Labeling Processes as Invisible Builders of Sacred Architecture

Labeling processes towards immigrant groups also had an influence on religious tower politics within Swiss political discourse and acted as “invisible builders” of sacred architecture. Towers of religious buildings are the most visible elements of “religion” in a townscape. Public debates on Muslim sacred buildings in Switzerland and finally the ban on minarets in 2009 have affected temple building processes in Switzerland, for instance in the construction of a South Asian style temple in Switzerland. The existing four minarets in Switzerland are perceived differently in comparison to the newly erected Hindu temple tower that Tamil migrants built in Trimbach, near the city of Olten. One major reason for the Swiss minaret ban in 2009 was not their actual function but their perceived symbolic dimension. [8] They were seen as symbols of an antidemocratic claim regarding the superiority of “the Islam”. Muslim attempts at building mosques with visible minarets were linked to the issue of Islamic fundamentalism. In contrast, Tamils who practice Hindu ritu-

[5] Expert-Interview, 09.03.2008, Krishna-Temple in Zurich (my translation from German to English).

[6] Expert-Interview, 09.03.2008, Krishna-Temple in Zurich (my translation from German to English; emphasis mine).

[7] This described antagonism of different needs of western and Tamil devotees stands in contrast to how the founder of ISKCON – A.C. Bhaktivedānta Svāmī Prabhupāda (1896–1977) – saw the relationship between “the West” and India: Following the prevalent view in the mid-nineteenth century, Prabhupāda described the Indian cultural space as marked by “spiritual values”, while he saw the western cultural space as having lost the access to spirituality and being primarily oriented toward materialism (see Neubert 2010b: 79).

als are in the first place perceived as an ethnic group and only secondly as a religious group. This correlates in most cases to the self-perception of Tamil actors. *Tamilness* is as important as *Hinduness* for most Tamil Hindus in Switzerland. This view of Tamil-Hindu traditions as part of Tamil culture might be related to their engagement in the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka.

The *Sri Maṅḍōnmaṅi Ampāl Ālayam* in Trimbach is the first purpose-built traditional *Cī-va*-temple in Switzerland with a high-rising *kōpuram*, inaugurated in 2013. The president of the association that was constructing the temple expressed his uncertainty about how parts of the Swiss majority would react. He perceived the local power structures as biased and especially felt that the erection of the 14,17-meter high *kōpuram* was risky in light of the minaret controversy. He also referred to the fluidity of the public perception of immigrant groups that he as a Tamil migrant experienced himself (from “criminals” to “the model immigrants”). The effect was that the Tamils were extremely cautious in the public presentation of their construction project and adopted a defensive public relations policy during the construction process.

The same discourse also had an effect on the process of the transformation of a hall in Dürnten (Canton Zurich) into a sacred space for the *Srī Viṣṇu Turkkai Ammaṅ* in the year 2010. [9] Due to the minaret debate, the group responsible for this project adjusted their plan to build an entrance tower as an extension to the hall. They decided to only rebuild the interior and erect at the entrance gate two columns with traditional ornaments. The Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* reported: “A Koopuram, a temple tower, is not planned in the conversion. ‘We do not want to stir up conflicts’, says the priest. Currently, because of the minaret discussion, it would not be the right time for it anyway. He also did not want to cause the confidence of the residents of the village Dürnten to falter.” [10] Such strategies of Tamil Hindu actors are a response to social tensions: Tamil Hindus want to be regarded and treated differently from Muslim migrants.

Final Remarks

The two examples presented above can be understood as instances of labeling processes in the context of religion and migration in a specific national context. They show that *othering processes* are influential factors of migrant incorporation and are affecting public strategies of migrants within the religious field. The first example describes asymmetrical relationships between the Tamil devotees and the Western devotees within the ISKCON temple; discursive processes by which a powerful group, the operators of the temple, ascribes inferior characteristics to the newly arriving Tamil devotees. Tamil visitors are perceived as deviant from the ‘normal’ Krishna devotees. The dominant ascription patterns within the field establish the following contrasting pairs: normal vs. Tamil/ white vs. black/ spiritual vs. religious. My hypothesis is that these deviations can be understood as part of a longer history of colonial power relations. It could be fruitful to analyze the dynamics

[8] A relevant feature of the Swiss political system is the system of direct democracy. The referenda and popular initiatives are important instruments for expressing the will of the citizens. In November 2009 the article 72 “Church and State” of the Federal Constitution was supplemented by adding a third paragraph that addresses the public visibility of one immigrant religion: “The building of minarets is prohibited”. The ban on minarets was the result of a referendum initiated by individual members of the right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP) and the evangelical Federal Democratic Union (EDU). This initiative was preceded by a politicization of religious differences by the SVP, which since 2003 has been the strongest party at the Swiss federal elections (2003, 2007, 2011).

[9] The temple moved from Adliswil (Canton Zurich) to a former factory building in Dürnten in 2010, because the lease expired in Adliswil and the priest wanted a more suitable space for the rituals; the dedication ceremonies were held on 27.01.2010.

[10] Wilma Hahn, “Gemeindepräsident feiert mit Hindus”, in: *Tages-Anzeiger*, 23.11.2009 (translated from German to English).

between established neo Hindu-groups in the West and newly arriving migrants through a postcolonial lens and to also take the perspectives of *Critical Whiteness Studies* into account. The second example shows that othering processes towards Muslim migrants can also influence incorporation strategies of other immigrant religions in the same context. Local power structures and dominant discourses about Muslims affect the public representation of other minority groups. My example reveals the ongoing process of negotiating appropriate forms of public visibility. Islamophobic othering as a discriminating distinction process also has an influence on other religious minorities, restricts them in their public presentation and furthers their desire to distinguish themselves from the Muslim minority in the Swiss national public sphere.

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2. 'ARABIC' REFUGEES IN GERMANY: ASCRIPTION PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

ANNIKA JACOBSEN

14

The large number of people seeking refuge in Europe from war, extreme poverty, and other hardships over the last couple of years has presented their new host societies with various challenges, from economical and infrastructural ones to the complicated process of the integration of the displaced. Regarding the latter, the issue of religion is often presented as an especially difficult and conflict-ridden aspect of social and cultural negotiations. An increasing fear – partly fed by right-populist political actors – of religious extremism and terrorism, which greatly contributed to the various forms of forced migration we see today, reinforces and further escalates this discourse. In how far this dynamic has an impact on religious plurality and is fueled by ascription processes will be illustrated by examples from some preliminary results of an ongoing ethnographic dissertation project on the religious practice and networking of refugees in Hamburg, Germany. [11]

The interviews I conducted with refugees predominantly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have shown that religion played at best a moderate role in the daily lives of the interviewees. Even though Afghanistan is not an Arabic country, the remarks of Afghan interview partners are included as part of my argument as they make up a significant number of refugees in Germany and are generally identified as 'Arabic' by the host society due to their outward appearance, which is precisely part of the dynamic I seek to address below. Some of the interviewees identified as Muslim, some simply as 'believers' without specifying their religious affiliation, and some described themselves as atheists. They largely expressed that they valued the coping mechanisms of personal faith and held religiously connotated family traditions in high regard, irrespective of their own religious affiliation. All of the camps and accommodations my interview partners had lived in had tried to establish the facility as a religiously neutral space and prohibited "religious practice" and forms of material religion such as prayer groups, bible study groups, and the display of religious writings. Camp staff interviewed by me stated that a notice board was equipped with the addresses of various mosques and churches where refugees could go to satisfy their religious needs. Otherwise they were allowed to pray in their own rooms by themselves, but in the case of the initial reception camps refugees were often accommodated in large halls with bunk beds only separated by make-shift partitions or even sheets, which would reduce their personal space to their own bed. Still all religious interview partners expressed that they did not experience these restricted possibilities to practice their belief

[11] My dissertation project "'Religion' Between Stigma and Resource. Religious and Non-Religious Identities and Practices of Refugees in Initial Reception Camps and Refugee Accommodations in Hamburg" is funded by the Humanities Doctoral Program of the University of Hamburg, Germany. The aim of the study is to examine and portray the religious and non-religious affiliations and beliefs of refugees in Germany in the context of the lives in the different accommodations, with a special focus on the impact of ascription processes of the host society on these dynamics. The data underlying the project consists of questionnaire-based qualitative interviews with refugees, camp/accommodation staff and public figures in the field of refugee housing and integration as well as field research in initial reception camps and refugee accommodations in Hamburg, Germany.

in the camps as problematic. Furthermore, some of the decidedly atheist refugees stated that after their arrival in Germany they had started attending a nearby mosque to network and socialize, even if they did not take part in any religious practices or gatherings. Some of the self-identified firm practitioners, on the other hand, stopped going to the mosque to pray, saying that their experience with increasing religious extremism in their countries of origin had turned them away from religious institutions. But despite their diversity, almost all of them seemed to share one experience: They were faced with incidents in which a conservative to downright extremist Muslim identity was ascribed to them by members of the German host society. What do these instances of labeling imply in the context of religious identities and what are the social circumstances producing them?

While some of the interviewees expressed that at first they were amused and bewildered by the surprising interest in their personal faith, all of them felt stigmatized and offended over time. Those incidents did not necessarily involve a hostile attitude towards Islam, as some interviewees explained, rather they seemed to stem from genuine curiosity. But nonetheless these experiences were connected to an image of Islam that was alien to the refugees themselves. The frustration sparked by such experiences seemed to increase in proportion to their awareness of the way how the media coverage and the public discourse in Germany depicts refugees in regard to a number of problems that allegedly result from their religious otherness. It is interesting to note that all the interviewees, Muslims, believers, and atheists, felt equally attacked and stigmatized.

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Although the reaction of the German public since 2015 towards the arrival of such a large number of refugees at once can be described as predominantly welcoming and constructive, the media coverage of the so-called "refugee crisis" in Germany as well as the development of the political discourse ever since have also revealed and fueled the omnipresence of Islamophobic tendencies. These increased significantly with the emergence of terrorism in the name of Islam, e.g. 9/11, and are continuously revitalized by the actions of groups like ISIS. In these debates, 'the' refugees are often seen as a homogenous mass of Muslims, this perception apparently stemming from their affiliation to predominantly Muslim nations (Ates 2006; Said 2008).

This is not only problematic because this Islamophobic othering correlates with various forms of discrimination. The artificial Muslim group identity created from the outside suppresses the diversity of cultural, ethnic, and geographical facets of beliefs and practices while simultaneously constructing boundaries to the outgroup.

The ascription patterns described by my interview partners between May 2016 and October 2017 in Hamburg took on various forms, as can be seen in some of the stories they told me: "I was out with a couple of friends once and had a glass of wine. One of them was shocked: Are you allowed to drink that? He then realized it was a weird question and said: I thought you were too young. That was very smart of him, but I knew what he really meant to say." The interview partner implies that the friend was playing on her being Muslim and hence not allowed to drink alcohol, but then became aware of the underlying generalization that she might have taken as offensive and changed his implication to the less sensitive topic of age. This incident addresses an aspect of the othering of Muslims in Western societies in which it is assumed that Muslims practice their religion more rigorously and conservatively than others. This image is often accompanied by the assumption that there is a consensus among the Muslims regarding rules, norms, and traditions in Islam. This assumption of a rigid and homogenous practice draws upon the image of Islam as a dogmatic if not extremist religion (Daniel 2012).

"People have asked me: Why are you here? If you're Muslim – which I am not – why are you in a Christian country? And I asked: Do you even go to church?" The interview partner describes the demand to justify his coming to Germany, which is problematized by the counterpart in reference to the alleged different religious convictions of the interviewee and

the host society. His counterpart apparently assumes that he is Muslim without having asked him and then contrasts this Muslim identity to Germany being a Christian country. This exemplifies the othering process by members of the German society which identifies 'the refugee' as 'the Muslim'. This process is closely linked to a debate about repressive practices and an understanding of Islam as a counterpart to 'Christian values'. The interviewee's reply questions the religious affiliation of the other person and thereby alleges that the issue of religion might only be instrumentalized to create distance between "the refugees" and the host society.

The German public's striking interest in the refugees' religion is also illustrated in the following quote: "I was amused at first, when people kept asking or lecturing me about Islam. No one had ever been that interested in my faith before. But I read the newspapers in Germany, and I know how people see us now." The interviewee expresses that he is frequently asked about his religious affiliation, even though it remains unclear in this quote if he is actually Muslim or not. It becomes evident that in Germany the people he talks to have an interest in his alleged Muslim identity that is unmatched by his previous experiences. This "amused" him at first since he may have taken it as genuine interest in his faith. However, the last sentence suggests that he learned about the negative ascriptions towards either refugees or Muslims as well as the way in which much media coverage closely links the two.

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The Islamophobic othering visible here should not be seen as totally surprising, considering the historical development of the relation of the German society to the predominantly Turkish so-called "guest workers" who migrated to Germany in the 1960's and 70's.

Religion did not play a significant role in the public discourse at that time. Even though the Muslims amongst the migrants did establish religious networks in their host cities, the public only started taking interest in their religiosity in the late 1990s (Spielhaus 2013). According to Hafez (2002), the media coverage of the Middle East conflict, the Algerian war, and the oil crisis amongst others created a threatening image of Islam even before the rise of Islamic terrorism. However, the discourse was undoubtedly intensified after 9/11, when the debate about Islam was gradually linked to a debate about public security (Ates 2006; Trautmann 2006). These developments entailed a re-labeling of 'the migrant' as 'the Muslim' (Hierl 2012; Tezcan 2011) and thus forcing the affected into a group identity they constantly had to grapple with. Especially the second generation of these immigrant families, who largely identified as German, were faced with an alleged Muslim (and therefore 'other than German') stigma (see Spielhaus 2011).

An interesting re-labeling can be observed here: 'religion' began to replace 'ethnicity', and thereby put into motion a variety of negotiation and transformation processes both outside but most importantly within the labeled community (Spielhaus 2013).

In the case of the discriminating othering taking place in the German host society towards the allegedly Arabic refugees, the question remains how these labeling processes are affecting their religious identities and the dynamics of their lives in their communities. In my field work and the interviews I conducted, it became evident that the refugee communities within the camps revolve mostly around nationality or ethnicity, with faith being a less addressed matter amongst them.

Yet, one of the interview partners made clear that even though he is still an atheist, he identifies more and more with his Muslim fellow refugees and in such confrontations takes on their role in order to defend them. Another interviewee suggested that the critical view of Islam by the Germans gave him the freedom to embrace the thought of turning away from his religious practice, which he always had understood as a social burden. The labeling processes by members of the German public towards the refugees seem to have sparked another re-labeling in the individual. On the one hand, non-Muslim refugees re-

port going to Mosques here in Germany to socialize and seek help for their settlement, and thus finding a new connection to religious space. For some of them, the ongoing Islamophobic othering has even led to a new solidarity with their Muslim fellows, which plays out in the former defending the latter against allegations and assumptions, even though they still do not share their belief. This dynamic may partly be fueled by frustration and resignation toward the host society that forces even the non-Muslim refugees to deal with Islam and their own stance in this debate. It will be interesting to see how such bonds will develop over time, if for example a 'cultural Islam' is developed by the non-Muslim refugees. On the other hand, former self-identified religious refugees find in the lacking interest in and also the critical views on both religion and specifically Islam the freedom to question their own religious affiliation, to alter it or to turn away from it altogether. It remains to be seen how this development may change their belonging to Muslim and non-Muslim refugee communities and affect new connections made outside these communities. In all instances a loosening up of the established Muslim and non-Muslim communities can be observed in this diasporic setting.

In the context of the refugees and their alleged religious identity ascribed by the German society, the question becomes pressing who decides what 'religion' is and what this label entails as opposed to other labels. For example, prayer groups and banners with religious text were forbidden by the operators of the initial reception camps that I visited. However, one interviewee reported that a Christmas tree was put up and a Christmas party was organized for the children in his camp. When he asked staff about it, he was told that Christmas trees were not a 'religious' symbol, but an expression of the German 'culture'. This incident demonstrates something well documented: that religions are not monolithic blocks that can be understood separated from cultural and ethnic contexts. What is striking in this situation is how fluidly and seemingly arbitrarily labels are changed, at least by the dominating group. Furthermore, one cannot help but notice the underlying connotation of 'culture' versus 'religion': While religious symbols are prohibited due to the sensitivity of the topic, or more bluntly the danger of conflict, expressions of culture are apparently seen as unproblematic.

What does stand out in my material is that 'religion', 'culture', and 'nationality' (or 'ethnicity') are labels that should be seen as non-natural categories of difference, constructs of public discourse, applied to re-enforce certain agendas or serve as tools of social negotiation processes. What remains to be examined is what the conditions for a switching of labels are and in how far such re-labeling changes the perception of religion and non-religion in this context.

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3. (UN)LABELING 'RELIGION': TOOLS FOR A 'RELIGION'- SENSITIVE EDUCATION OF CONFLICT MANAGERS

PETRA TILLESSEN

In the following I want to sketch a preliminary answer to two main research questions in the context of a larger project on tools for a 'religion'-sensitive education of conflict managers: 1. On the basis of recent critical conceptual debates in the academic study of religion/s, what kind of knowledge regarding 'religion' can we (still) provide as an orientation in an increasingly plural and diverse society? 2. How can we spread this knowledge through practical assignments in the education of societal multipliers, and especially of conflict managers and mediators?

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'Religion' in the Education of Conflict Managers and Mediators

Mediation is a booming field aimed at providing tools that better allow us to deal with interpersonal conflicts. But how do 'religious dimensions' figure in such conflicts? In the education of professional mediators, the topic of 'religion' – or more precisely any instruction about the 'religious dimensions' of conflicts – is often linked with so-called 'intercultural mediation'. Questions of dealing with 'cultural plurality' and possible cultural differences have become a main focus in conceptualizing mediation in the last years. This is not unproblematic. A working group on *Interkulturelle Mediation* (intercultural mediation) of the German *Bundesverband Mediation* points to the dangers of understanding cultures as monolithic blocks, of focusing on (assumed) cultural differences as the source of conflicts, or of labeling a conflict as 'intercultural' while losing sight of other possible underlying reasons of a particular dispute. In reaction to these problems, some mediators opt for the concept of a 'culturally-sensitive' mediation (implying more fuzzy demarcations) and a larger focus on various aspects of cultural plurality – not only *intercultural*, but also *intra-cultural* and *intrapersonal* dimensions.

While such new approaches try to overcome the idea of cultures as monolithic blocks, 'religion(s)' are often still treated as stable and self-contained entities – with reference to groups, but in particular as far as individual identities are concerned. 'Religion' is also frequently regarded as a 'unique phenomenon', a very special and difficult thing to deal with, and 'religious' convictions are seen as not or hardly negotiable.

It is therefore often recommended to deal with 'religion' e.g. by translating 'religious' questions into other "social languages" (Aroua 2010; Mason, Aroua and Åberg 2010; Aroua 2011). Or to approach 'religious' (assumedly not easily rationalized) dimensions in conflicts through the use of art. Michelle LeBaron, professor of law at the university of British Co-

lumbia, suggests such kinds of interventions not only for religious dimensions in conflicts, but also for other deeply embedded 'cultural' dimensions, which cannot be easily addressed or expressed in rational terms. She develops the concept of "cultural fluency" as an approach to overcome borders between individuals and groups (LeBaron 2003). Although over the years her use of art appears to work well in dealing with deadlocked conflicts, I see a danger of reinforcing established but outdated prejudices in her conceptualization of religion as a 'deeper' dimension of conflict that cannot be rationalized. Religion could end up being seen as an essentially problematic entity that is hardly negotiable.

While mediation generally aims to bridge (assumed) borders in the preparation of conflict managers for dealing with such 'religious dimensions', current approaches might therefore inadvertently be furthering a practice of othering, especially through a 'translation' of religion into other social spheres and languages seen as more rational or reasonable. Demarcations or differences presupposed by the mediator could be strengthened – and in the worst-case s/he could project them onto the conflict.

This is further complicated by the fact that – although most of the theoretical approaches in the education of conflict managers include attempts to question concepts like 'culture' – when it comes to practical assignments (possibly the most important aspect of the education of conflict managers and mediators), exercises like simulation games often still use a setting that pitches self-contained entities against each other on a frontline. Despite a softening of monolithic cultural blocks in theory and a shift towards a recognition of plurality and diversity in society, such assignments may even further entrench worn-out models of conflict and by this practice make them even more influential.

A combination of the expertise of the academic study of religion with the expertise of mediation training programs could possibly allow us to develop new practical assignments for a religion-sensitive mediation.

Flexible Facts as a Basis for a 'Religion'-Sensitive Mediation

The frame of reference for this project is determined by three things that we can learn from contemporary approaches in the academic study of religion/s (see e.g. Hermann, Mohn 2015; Stausberg 2012; Bergunder 2011; Gladigow 1995; Kippenberg et al. 2009).

1. Religions should not be understood as homogenous, monolithic blocks. Not only is there a plurality and diversity of religion/s in contemporary societies, but the academic study of religion has also drawn attention to the plurality and range of variations within religions.
2. The one-person-one-religion-model is highly questionable. In addition to the variety within religions, recent studies have highlighted the variable and plural nature of individual and intrapersonal religious identities.
3. Religion should not be treated as an always and already clearly delineated object. Its possible differentiation in a particular historical situation is the result of differentiating discourses.

In summary, the ideas developed below are based on such recent approaches in the study of religion/s that focus on the diversity, plurality, and flexibility of religion/s. This raises the question of what kind of knowledge we could provide as an orientation in matters of 'reli-

gion'? On the basis of what knowledge about 'religious dimensions' in conflict could we educate future conflict managers and mediators?

The kind of 'knowledge' we are looking for has to enable us to deal with the tension between flexibility and plurality on the one hand and stability on the other. For example: I would like to create an alternative to the traditional way of teaching that for religious reasons 'the' Muslims only eat *halal* food. Rather, I would like to point out the existing variation in regard to what is seen as *halal* and *haram* by different people and that an individual person can have a variety of reasons (in addition to religious beliefs) for picking a diet. Personal preferences, family traditions, conventions of the region one is living in, the prevalent habitus of the various social fields one is active in, etc., all can play a role. And, at the same time, I want to try to provide the knowledge that *halal* has something to do with food and religion and that this concept is a common point of reference in societal discourse, both in a positive, as well as in a negative way, when marking someone as different.

As a theoretical background for these ideas I draw on the work of Judith Butler and Michael Bergunder and adapt two general concepts:

1. *Contingency*. The historical, cultural construction and general changeability of concepts, meanings, presuppositions, etc.
2. *Sedimented iterability*. The sedimentation of concepts (Bergunder here focuses on "names"), as points of reference through acts of "recitation" in discourses (positive as well as negative).

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In a nutshell, by (historically) tracing back ascriptions of meaning, Butler and Bergunder show shifts and transformations in such ascriptions. Both point to the contextual and historical construction of allegedly fixed (or naturally given) concepts, names, etc. These therefore seem to be contingent. But on the other hand, they appear very stable, at least in common perception. To explain this stability, Judith Butler highlights the power of conventions and introduces the concept of "sedimented iterability". Through acts of continuing "recitation" in social discourses, these conventions become relatively stable, but not unchangeable (Butler 1995).

To bring together the concepts of flexibility and contingency, on the one hand, and stability (achieved through iterated recitation), on the other, I introduce the working concept of *flexible facts* to emphasize an assumed stability together with a fluid constructedness.

Rethinking Hands-On Exercises

The education of future conflict managers/mediators is often trapped in the dilemma of providing handy categories for practical application versus the aggressive potential of defining demarcation lines and applying superficial labels.

Recently there is a lot of excellent research in the academic study of religion/s that highlights plurality and diversity in matters of religion – too much maybe to serve as an orientation for future conflict managers. Many existing projects – in particular on the web – also attempt to provide knowledge for orientation in matters of religion. But again, as detailed and excellent as these projects are, they seem to have had not much effect on the education of conflict managers. Some mediators, like LeBaron, try not to work with (outdated) models of culture or religion and try to foreground cultural and religious diversity – for example with the concept of "cultural fluency" (LeBaron 2003; LeBaron and Pillay 2006).

But when it comes to practical training in the education of conflict managers (in Germany), very often ‘traditional’ or simplistically prepared roles are used. The development of new practical assignments, in order to transfer theoretical and historical insights regarding the diversity and plurality of religion into concrete hands-on exercises for example by developing new simulation games, is therefore one important aspect of my project. Below, I will present three examples of this work in progress: the hands-on exercises “My Groups” and “Labels”, and the simulation game “You As a Muslim...”.

The first two hands-on exercises “My groups” and “Labels” were not developed from scratch but rather are adaptations of hands-on exercises often used in intercultural trainings or in trainings for future conflict managers. The use of “simulation games” also is a well-established practice in trainings. It is therefore not my primary aim to invent completely new teaching methods but to develop new adaptations of well working teaching methods, so that they can be used to teach competence in matters of ‘religion’ and flexible facts about religion/s.

The assignments I present here were tested in teaching students from different disciplines. In my courses I expected a plurality of existing knowledge and the challenge, comparable to trainings for conflict managers, to give orientation about what competence and relevant knowledge in matters of ‘religion’ could be.

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The Last Step Is the Most Important: The Reflection

The most important aspect of this kind of teaching is the reflection after the hands-on exercises through different steps of abstraction (see in detail for the different steps: Koch, Tillessen, and Wilkens 2013: 119–122). To provide a basis for abstraction, a clear break between the hands-on exercise and the reflection is needed. A distance to the played role (esp. in simulation games) has to be established. This is best done explicitly and bodily (e.g. by taking off costumes, having a break, or shaking out hands and feet together with the roles that had been played). Then, as a first step, personal experiences and first impressions can be shared. Afterwards, attention can be drawn to the negotiations (what have they been about; where did conflicts escalate; what resolutions were attempted and what kinds of solutions were found – like confrontation and domination, compromise, synergistic effects, etc.). Here various (scientific) categories and theories can be used to (re)describe and to analyze the negotiations, dynamics, stereotypes, etc. that came into play in the assignment, as well the ‘cultural glasses’ and the assumptions of the participants. In regard to a ‘religion’-sensitive conflict management, the role of ‘religion’ should be particularly reflected upon. Who referred to ‘religion’ at what point; what part did such references play in the negotiations; when and how were distinctions made between arguments seen/labeled as ‘religious’ compared to arguments identified by other labels like political, practical, financial, etc.; how were distinctions between different forms of what was considered as ‘religious’ drawn and what was their effect? Contemporary approaches from the academic study of religion/s can help to analyze effects of labeling, highlight points of reference, draw attention to variations, and – most importantly – help to develop (new) ways to deal with the diffuse entity of ‘religion’ in conflicts. To accomplish this aim, a separate time slot for dealing with ‘discussing learned flexible facts’ about ‘religion’ should also be part of the reflection.

"My Groups": Teaching the Plurality of Group-Identifications

"My Groups" is an adaption of a hands-on exercise often used in the education of mediators.

Course of Action:

1. The participants are asked to draw or write down up to 5 groups they feel themselves to belong to or which they feel have influenced their life.
2. To focus on how participants treat 'religion', 'culture', or 'national/regional belongings', these categories can be addressed beforehand by using them as diffuse examples. It is important not to explain these examples in detail, otherwise this could easily restrict the participants imagination too much (and maybe in the end only point out the trainer's own presuppositions). It may be useful also to reflect on multireligious identities or the like by giving some diffuse examples regarding the trainer's own experience, like being influenced by Christianity and Buddhism, etc. Each participant describes to the other participants of the class her/his groups and how s/he feels related to them (if necessary the group can be divided into smaller groups).
3. Reflection: In the reflection of this assignment participants may for example be asked whether it was hard/easy to name groups; how many groups they would have needed to define themselves properly; how they feel about their identity in regard to their groups; and how they would feel if they were identified by others belonging to only one of their groups.

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Intended teaching effect: One teaching effect is to make participants learn that different definitions of (similar) groups are possible, as frequently similar groups are named (especially when participants have the chance to discuss with each other). Most of all, this assignment teaches participants by their own example that most people feel that they belong to a variety of different groups and rarely identify with only one group – the challenge for most of the participants is the instruction to name only up to 5 groups, not more. This can be reflected upon and re-described analytically with different theories of identity on the basis of different models of society like systems-theory or field-theory (with individuals as actors in those different fields). With regard to 'religion', variations of definition can be reflected upon and questions of belonging to more than one 'religion' or questions about 'trans-religious' flows can be discussed. The last step in the education of conflict managers/mediators should be a discussion of what effect the multiple identifications could have for conflicts and how to deal with that.

"Labels": Teaching the Effects of Ascriptions

"Labels" is an adaption of a hands-on exercise often used in intercultural trainings.

Course of Action:

1. Every participant of the course gets labeled with a sticker ascribing a quality to them like "lazy", "irresponsible", "responsible", "organizing ability", "joker", "silver-tongued", and so on – and, to particularly explore labeling effects relating to religion, labels like "missionary", "mystic orientated", "enlightening critic of religion", "spiritual searcher", "fundamentalist", and so on. These labels should be written on a piece of paper and fixed to the clothes of the participants, so that everyone can read the labels of the other participants but not the one stuck on himself/herself.

2. The group is given a job, like the planning of an event, e.g. a panel discussion about religious signs in a refugee camp. The group shall plan the preparation of this event in detail, with very concrete assignments of upcoming things to do (writing a welcoming speech, booking the rooms, organizing the technical equipment, invitation of guests, etc.). Most important: when discussing the planning of the event and organizing it, the participants shall treat each other according to the qualities written on the attached labels.

3. Reflection: The reflection on this assignment starts with personal impressions of the dynamics witnessed. Participants can reflect on how they felt being ascribed a particular characteristic, being treated according to that ascription, and what impact this had on their actions.

Intended teaching effect: With this assignment, participants make a very personal experience of how labels may affect actions. Labels may have a great influence on how we treat our counterparts. In reacting to how we are treated by others they have an influence on what we think of ourselves and on how we act. Likewise, labels and ascriptions have an impact on what place we concede to the topic of 'religion' in negotiations.

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Simulation Game "You As a Muslim...": Teaching Plurality and Diversity

Simulation games are a well-established practice in trainings for the improvement of social skills. In a setting with (more or less detailed) prepared roles and a pre-planned situation (complex) conflicts can be simulated. The course of action is framed – but not completely predetermined. Depending on the time available, it is possible to simulate only a particular phase of a mediation.

The participants receive roles (parties of the conflict, mediators, observer, etc.), but then they are free to interpret their own role as they wish. In the simulation game they can try different communication strategies and actions. They can test what actions, strategies, and argumentations may intensify a conflict, and how to bring new perspectives into frozen situations, e.g. by focusing on the needs and aims of the conflict parties instead of trying to negotiate positions (Aroua 2011).

The reflection: Once again, the most important part of this assignment is the reflection, and in this case a clear break between the simulation game and the reflection is fundamental. It is also very helpful to provide time for a more personal reflection on the roles (e.g. what was easy, what was hard, personal experiences and feelings). It helps people to step out of the role they have played by getting the chance to express themselves (even if this may feel very difficult in the beginning, because in most cases, esp. in contexts like universities, it is not common to express oneself on a personal level). After this step, the reflection can progress to an analytical analysis of the simulated conflict and the negotiations. The role 'religion' played can be reflected upon with the help of descriptions and approaches from the contemporary academic study of religion/s. Sometime, for example, a role that is framed as being influenced by different 'religions' is described by the participants as an illegitimate, eclectic mixture. This is a starting-point to question an understanding of 'religion' as a self-contained entity, to discuss the impact of concepts like 'syncretism', and to discuss whether a concept like 'multireligious identity' may be more appropriate to approach conflicts in current societies.

Intended teaching effect and the use of flexible facts in matters of 'religion': In using simulation games to improve competence in matters of 'religion', it is very important to emphasize that it is not the goal to teach 'religious experiences' through the simulation. The aim is to improve the participants' sensitivity for 'religious' dimensions of conflicts (as

well as situations in which 'religion' is being referred to in order to make an argument or explain a confrontational encounter). The intended teaching goal is to learn by practicing diverse strategies of negotiation in such situations.

The constructed character of simulation games can be seen as a negative point, as Michelle LeBaron critically remarks (https://www.mediate.com//articles/lebaron_full_interview.cfm [20.09.2018]). She feels they are often detached from the personal experience of the participants and that is the reason why she does not use such games in her trainings anymore, drawing on and working with personal experiences instead.

In my opinion, both approaches can be useful. It is exactly the games' constructed character, the preparation of roles, and the pre-prepared setting that provide an occasion to teach some 'flexible facts' together with a practical training.

I am therefore currently working on developing a simulation game, in which I try to point to variations of some 'facts' that participants may feel they know well. In this game I am framing a conflict between four friends, two of them sharing a flat. I design the roles with overlapping – at first sight maybe even conflicting – group identities. I frame them to be influenced by different 'religions', let them refer to 'Islam', 'atheism', 'spirituality', 'Protestantism', to 'values', '(family) traditions', and so on. One role, for example, is characterized by having a parental background from Tunisia and Italy, but having grown up in Bavaria, Germany, identifying him-/herself with a 'Bavarian life style' and feeling to belong to Islam as well as to the Catholic faith of his/her mother. The frame of the conflict is about "party life", especially the use of alcohol, about food and the frequency friends are invited. The conflict is sketched to break out when one shouts to the other "how can you as a Muslim be such an alcoholic!".

With this simulation game I try to raise awareness about the diversity of what 'religion' can be about; that food can have something to do with 'religion' just as much as with other moral concepts, with family traditions, personal preferences, and much more. I introduce *halal* and *haram* as points of reference (positive and negative) when it comes to 'Islam' and show that there can be a range of variations in what is seen as *halal* and *haram* (see also above, section "Flexible Facts as a Basis for a 'Religion'-Sensitive Mediation"). By describing the roles as being influenced by various values, moral concepts, 'religions', etc., I try to break up a fixed understanding of 'religions' and introduce concepts like 'multireligious identity' (or 'fluid religious identities'). Moreover, I intend to show how difficult it may be to distinguish 'religious' from other matters in conflicts. This poses – at least in the reflection after the game – the question of whether participants would describe the conflict they just witnessed as an 'interreligious conflict' and if/ how such a focus can be problematic. Should an exercise like this be considered part of an 'interreligious' or of a 'religion-sensitive mediation'? I propose seeing it as part of the latter and am working on developing additional similar training methods and (practical) tools for a 'religion-sensitive mediation'.

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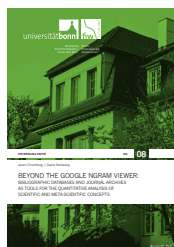
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