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Giovanni Maltese

TOWARDS A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO RELIGION  
A RESPONSE TO “THE LABEL OF ‘RELIGION’: MIGRATION AND ASCRIPTIONS  
OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE” AND A CRITIQUE OF  
“MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES”

Oktober 2019

# TOWARDS A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO RELIGION

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IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE”  
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## ABSTRACT

This working paper presents a poststructuralist approach to religion studies and discusses its usefulness in an exemplary way by engaging with FIW working paper no. 11 on labeling processes of migrants in contemporary Europe. The first part reads the case studies as investigations into how religion is transformed as a result of different negotiation processes. From this perspective the analytical category of labeling demonstrates the shortcomings of essentialist conceptualizations as presupposed in the notion of multiple religious identities. At the same time, it compels us to look for a framework that allows to theorize religion as a product of demarcation and identity making, embedded in a context of power asymmetries, which owe themselves to global entanglements. The second part argues that a post-foundationalist approach that combines poststructuralist hegemony theories, such as those suggested by Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler, with insights from global history studies as proposed by Michael Bergunder, offers such a framework.



# FOREWORD

ADRIAN HERMANN

This working paper by Giovanni Maltese (a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Religion Studies at Forum Internationale Wissenschaft from 2017 to 2018) presents a post-structuralist approach to religion studies and discusses its usefulness in an exemplary way by shortly engaging with the three sections of FIW working paper no. 11 on labeling processes of migrants in contemporary Europe. The author bases his comments and reflections on a perspective that has recently gained much prominence in the discipline of religious studies, particularly in Germany. Led by Michael Bergunder, a number of scholars have made use of poststructuralist and postcolonial theories to develop an answer to the question of how the subject matter of religious studies is to be conceptualized. Their approach points to a rigorous historical exploration and genealogical reconstruction of the emergence and establishment of what Bergunder (2014: 246) calls “Religion 2”, a “consensus-capable, contemporary, everyday understanding of ‘religion’” that pervades both societal debates on religion as well as scholarly writing on the topic. [1] Instead of working on new abstract theories of a proposed phenomenon of “religion”, the task of religious studies is seen as the historical and contemporary investigation of this everyday understanding of “religion”. According to Bergunder (2014), it is this everyday understanding, its history, and the conditions of its emergence that should be understood as the hitherto “unexplained subject matter” of the discipline. In drawing on a variety of elements from the theoretical thinking of Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault, “Religion 2” is conceptualized in a discourse-theoretical framework, and a “history of a name” (based on Laclau) – instead of a “history of the concept” – is proposed (Bergunder 2014: 259–273). While other ways of theorizing this everyday understanding of “religion” are explicitly welcomed (Bergunder 2014: 256), it is this poststructuralist, discourse-theoretical perspective which has received much attention in the last couple of years.

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The approach has been co-developed and taken up by other scholars connected with the University of Heidelberg in studies on e.g. Western Esotericism (Strube 2016), Pentecostalism in Ethiopia (Haustein 2012), India (Suarsana 2013) and the Philippines (Maltese 2017), as well as Christian Missions in 19th century India (Schröder 2016). Additionally, other work in different areas of religion studies engages with and refers to Bergunder’s post-structuralist conceptualization of “religion” in varying detail (see e.g. Neubert 2015; Trein 2016; Pollack 2018). The approach has become a staple in the general debate on discourse-theoretical and discourse-analytical approaches in the study of religion (see Neubert 2014).

Inasmuch as Bergunder understands himself as working towards a “global religious history” (2014: 280) and therefore explicitly aims at a global level of theorizing and historical reconstruction, how can his theoretical suggestions be contrasted with world society theory? The relationship of poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches to systems theory and world society theory is a rather underexplored issue (but cf. Stäheli and Stichweh 2002), even if authors like Urs Stäheli (2000; 2008) or Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003) have engaged with this topic. One central open question, on the one hand, is the relationship of the concept of “discourse” to systems theory. David Kaldewey (2014), for example, has proposed to complement the existing difference between structure and semantics in

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[1] One common question regarding this approach is whether such a proposed everyday understanding of religion is a Western, a regional, or a global occurrence. In Bergunder’s view (2014: 276), drawing on postcolonial theory and global history approaches, the emergence of “Religion 2” is a historical phenomenon on a global scale. See also Hermann 2016 on the question of a “global discourse of religion”.

systems theory with discourse as a third concept. Stäheli (2004) has developed some thoughts on a combination of Luhmann's historical analysis of semantics with Michel Foucault's discourse analysis. Postcolonial critiques of world society theory, on the other hand, have attempted to take the theory to task for its supposed incapability of moving beyond an ultimately colonial observation of modernity (see Eckstein and Reinfandt 2014).

In further exploring religion as a "global category" (Stichweh 2015), it therefore seems fruitful to intensify these theoretical conversations. A future religion studies that is interested both in the insights of Luhmannian world society theory as well as current critical debates about the category of religion necessarily has to engage with postcolonial and poststructuralist theories. In light of the recent prominence of a poststructuralist, discourse-theoretical approach to religion, it is necessary to take stock of what this perspective can elucidate. Giovanni Maltese's paper should be seen as a step in this direction.

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# TOWARDS A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO RELIGION

## A RESPONSE TO “THE LABEL OF ‘RELIGION’: MIGRATION AND ASCRIPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE” AND A CRITIQUE OF “MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES”

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An analysis of the many ways in which “religion” is used as a label in contemporary debates about migration in Europe is an important topic for religion studies. The three sections of the FIW working paper written by Rafaela Eulberg, Annika Jacobsen, and Petra Tillessen, which I will shortly engage with here, all draw our attention to various ways religion is negotiated vis-à-vis other terms such as spirituality, culture, and nation in a specific context. It is in this negotiation processes that religion comes to represent a potent signifier that is shaped by and shapes concrete social realities. Thus, the three authors suggest that religion eschews essentialist definitions such as those presupposed in the concept of ‘multiple religious identities’ [2], if the latter is used as an analytical term. My response is divided into two parts. Firstly, I will give my own short reading of Eulberg’s, Jacobsen’s, and Tillessen’s arguments. Secondly, I deal with the question: what do their findings and reflections mean for the study of religion in general, if one is to take labeling processes seriously? Here, I will discuss the theoretical lens responsible for my specific reading and sketch the approach of conceptualizing religion which drives my own research.

### 1. INCORPORATING HINDU TAMIL MIGRANTS IN SWITZERLAND

*Rafaela Eulberg’s* section on Tamil migrants in Switzerland shows how social ascriptions are part of “discursive practices, and organizational structures that define the status of foreigners vis-à-vis the host state, [... along with the] boundaries of their participation in host policy institutions” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 8) – and as such affect their “incorporation” even to the point of acting as “invisible builders of sacred architecture” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 7–8). In the introduction, Eulberg gives an overview of how Tamils have been perceived by various social actors, from (local) government agencies through mass media to racist skinhead-gangs and “public opinion” in gen-

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[2] “Multiple religious identities” was the theme of the 16th annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), held on June 17–21, 2018, in Bern, Switzerland. Given the self-understanding of EASR, it is interesting to note that a cursory database search (such as [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org)) for “multiple religi\*s identit\*” in book and article titles seems to show that the concept primarily appears in works that have a decidedly theological interest. The three sections of the working paper I comment on here refer either implicitly to ‘multiple religious identities’, given that they represent reworked versions of papers presented at EASR 2018, or explicitly use it as a paradigm, albeit not necessarily defining it.

eral (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 8). She distinguishes three phases which display a certain trend towards an increasingly less hostile perception, even if the last phase appears rather ambivalent. Tamil migrants who came to Switzerland in the 1980s were first regarded as a group of rather uncanny “foreigners” epitomized by the catchphrase “strange black man” and its xenophobic and racist undertones. This changed from the 1990s onwards, when the “public opinion” in Switzerland began to consider them as “model migrants” whose main characteristic was to be “industrious and inconspicuous”. This shift occurred along with an increasing focus on another group: “Muslim migrants” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 8). The third phase, beginning around 2009, altered this, according to Eulberg, overly positive perception. Due to drastic performances of activism by Tamil migrants in Switzerland addressing issues of injustice against the repression of Tamils in Sri Lanka, the “Swiss public” began to take a more ambivalent stance towards them. Yet compared to “Muslim migrants”, Tamils were generally viewed as “calm” and “peaceful” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 8). The main part of Eulberg’s paper presents two examples which demonstrate how such ascription processes were reproduced within the Hare Krishna community in Zurich and in the context of temple construction politics in two other Swiss municipalities.

Her first example focusses on the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Zürich. Here we learn that while ISKCON leaders (including the operators of the temple) had first embraced Tamil practitioners sympathetically, they soon began to show an ambivalence in their attitudes towards them. In this shift, they drew on existing practices of representation describing Tamil practitioners along the binaries “normal vs. Tamil / white vs. black / spiritual vs. religious” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 11). Eulberg calls these practices of representation “labeling processes”, and argues that they served as tools by which “Tamil practitioners were regarded as internal strangers” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 10). This led to tensions among the ISKCON-community and the establishment of the Swiss Tamil Krishna Society. The newly founded association became the guardian of the interests of “the Tamils” and launched its own Sunday Festival.

The second example discusses labeling in relation to construction plans of a Hindu temple in Trimbach and the transformation of a hall into a temple dedicated to Śrī Viṣṇu Turkkai Ammaṅ in Dürnten. In the Trimbach project, the promoters presented themselves in an unusually defensive demeanor when making public appearances, and in Dürnten the Cīva-group made considerable changes in their original construction plans and decided to erect two columns at the entrance of the shrine instead of a planned tower. Eulberg explains these developments by pointing to the so-called minaret-debate in Switzerland in the late 2000s, in which one camp sustained the thesis that minaret-towers represented a symbolical conquest of public space by Muslims. As “Muslim migrants” had replaced the “Tamil migrants” in embodying a threat to society, the promoters of both projects felt compelled to avoid any articulation bringing them close to ‘the Muslims’ (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 10–11) and endangering their new status as “model immigrants” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 8). In this way, ascription processes had material effects on the incorporation of Hindu Tamil migrants in Switzerland and on the politics of Hindu groups in Dürnten and Trimbach.

In her analysis, Eulberg unmasks the discrimination at work in ascription processes and shows that ascriptions referring to “religion” have material effects. It would be interesting to do more detailed research about the ways that these processes work and learn more about how the use of the category of “contact zone” to theorize power relations might offer additional analytical purchase on such ascriptions. This is also related to the use of the concept of “labeling”. What ascriptions of which aspects of social identities (“strange black man”, “peaceful”, “youth sect”) are problematized and at what moment? As, especially in such a short text, it is difficult to focus attention on all processes of labeling, how does one choose when to investigate and when not to focus critical attention on other labels like “Tamil migrants,” “Muslim migrants”? To borrow from the title of Petra Tillessen’s section, when is unlabeled “religion” necessary?

One may argue that Eulberg sometimes represents the Tamil migrants too much as passive objects of discrimination, not stressing enough that they were also active subjects, and vis-à-vis other groups also perpetrators of discrimination. In the second case study, for example, one could explore the contribution of the Tamil project-promoters to the Islamophobic discourse in their municipalities. Just as the ISCKON leaders discussed in the first case study, they engaged in the same othering practice as the Swiss public, lest their privileged position not be jeopardized. This critical remark is not intended as a call to trivialize the hegemonic relations that placed the Tamil project-promoters and their groups still in a subaltern position. On the contrary, it is intended to highlight an underlying ambivalence. Attributes like “industrious”, “calm”, and “peaceful” were certainly positive. Yet in combination with an exoticization of “Tamil Hindu religiosity”, it drew a demarcation line between the Tamils and the “rational”, “progressive”, and “free” Swiss. Thus, the apparently positive attributes created a three-level hierarchy that placed “the Swiss” on top and the “Muslims” at bottom, while the “Hindu Tamils” were given a precarious position in between. Accordingly, to be on eye-level with “Switzerland” implied to distance oneself from “religion.” All these ascriptions were therefore not detached from the discourse of the larger Swiss public which in turn owed itself to the global power relations: it reflected a familiar global hierarchy between “West” and “East” in a reactivation of Orientalist logics. This points to a more fundamental question: the question about how we conceptualize religion and reflect the fact that any articulation or scholarly investigation “is also always an activity of power” (Butler 1995:138). Should “religion” not be treated as a label in itself? Reflecting on Eulberg’s paper therefore invites us to develop a theoretical framework that allows for studying religion in the context of antagonistic hegemonic claims that are constitutive for processes of identity-making and are entangled in global power asymmetries. Such a framework that takes the researcher’s own position of power into account might be based on a post-foundationalist framework that combines poststructuralist hegemony theories with insights from global history studies (see below).

## 2. ASCRIPTION PROCESSES IN THE IDENTITY MAKING OF REFUGEES IN GERMANY

Annika Jacobsen studies how ascription processes involving people from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq who seek “refuge in Europe from war, extreme poverty, and other hardships” relate to issues of plurality in the broader framework of identity-making in Germany. Her main thesis is “that ‘religion’, ‘culture’, and ‘nationality’ (or ‘ethnicity’) are labels that should be seen as non-natural categories of difference, [...] applied to [...] serve as tools of social negotiation processes” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17). Based on ethnographic research in refugee camps and accommodations in Hamburg, Jacobsen investigates how such labels affected (a) the way her interlocutors positioned themselves vis-à-vis Islam and religion, (b) her interlocutors’ way of observing or not observing practices widely understood to be Islamic, (c) the way members of the host society, such as the refugee camp administration, negotiated what does or does not count as religion in the sense of religious symbols, performing etc.

One of Jacobsen’s most important findings is that “the interviewees, Muslims, believers and atheists, felt equally attacked and stigmatized” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15) by the predominant understanding that equates being refugee with being Muslim and with practicing “religion more rigorously and conservatively” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15). This was the case regardless of whether Jacobsen’s interlocutors described themselves as people to whom the “critical view of Islam by the Germans” had offered an opportunity to turn “away from [their ...] religious practice” or whether they

were “former self-identified religious refugee[s]” who began “to question” their “own religious affiliation” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 16–17). It was also the case when the interlocutors described themselves as atheists who had recently started to attend a mosque in order to socialize (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17).

According to Jacobsen’s analysis, her interlocutors find themselves facing only two options with regard to the articulation of their identity: either you are suspect because you are a Muslim who follows practices and has attitudes that are allegedly at odds with the culture of the host country; or, you do not conform to this pattern, which makes you even more suspect because you ought to be a Muslim who proves this stereotypic description to be true. These options were linked to the idea that newly immigrated refugees, according to large parts of the German host society, were supposed to be “Arabs”, even if they came from Afghanistan. Consequently, if they wanted to keep the conversation going and be taken seriously in their everyday interactions, the refugees positively or negatively had to relate to said stereotypes and to the discursive constraints they represented.

These findings prompt Jacobsen to ask about their implications for research on religion in the broader sense and to suggest that her interlocutors’ talk and understanding of religion was constitutively entangled not only with ascription processes (or labeling, to use her terminology). It was also constitutively entangled with the ways in which they positioned themselves in relation to said ascription processes and the discursive constraints they produced. Central for Jacobsen’s argument are two aspects. Firstly, that identity-making is embedded in a process of othering in which a group identity is created “from the outside”, i.e. by people who do not belong to that group (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15). “[M]embers of the German society” identified “‘the refugee’ as ‘the Muslim’” in close relationship to “repressive practices [...] of Islam” that created an opposition to ‘Christian values’” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 16). Building on the discussion of Eulberg’s argument, Othering takes place in a social context that is constitutively marked by power asymmetries. The second aspect central to Jacobsen’s argument is that negotiations of this kind are also negotiations of religion as a concept. She points out “that ‘religion’, ‘culture’, and ‘nationality’ (or ‘ethnicity’) are labels that should be seen as non-natural categories of difference” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17) and concludes that “[w]hat 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.” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17).

Jacobsen’s concept of Othering seems to imply that not only the “artificial Muslim group identity” is created in this process. Rather a “simultaneous[] construct[ion of] boundaries to the outgroup” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15) takes place. This suggests that whatever stands vis-à-vis “the Other” and creates the “Muslim group identity [...] from the outside” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15) is coterminous with said boundaries. A conceptual framework in which boundary making, difference, and the political can be theorized in a more robust way might be helpful here. The concept of the “empty signifier” suggested by political theoretician Ernesto Laclau (2007) could offer an interesting starting point (see Bergunder 2014, 2016, 2018; Maltese 2017, 2018, 2019).

If Othering does not only create the “other” but creates also the collective “self” that presents itself as a “we” in relation to a “them”, then the suppression of diversity constitutive for creating a group that represents the “Other” goes along with the suppression of fluid diversity among those who vis-à-vis the “Other” represent themselves as “we”. According to Laclau, this results from a subversion of differences into equivalences that happens on both sides simultaneously if one particular difference is made to represent (or is invested with) the totality of the fluid variety. This particular difference comes to embody the boundaries that structure the variety (or, perhaps better, the indeterminability) of differences present on both sides and arrests the fluidity of all particular identities that come to constitute the “we”. [3] If viewed through the lens of poststructuralist discourse theory, such an investment is a contingent process and is also the condition of meaning produc-

tion as such. Put differently, there is no necessary reason why one specific difference should work better than others to suppress the diversity than others and represent the totality of the discursive elements. Jacobsen's assertion that the creation of the group identity is an "artificial" one (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 15), is valid because it is based on "non-natural categories of difference", in the sense that whatever attribute is referenced to substantiate this difference, it owes itself to a selection process that is contingent, rather than necessary (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17). Thus, according to Laclau, any signification is constitutively related to the social context and any meaning is the result of antagonistic demarcations among people who mark their position in a specific discourse around an "empty signifier" that holds together "equivalential chains" (for further elaboration, see below). I am curious to know whether Jacobsen would agree with this line of thinking. [4]

If we understand "othering" along these theoretical reflections, we can study "religion" and "Islam" (including their relationship) without essentializing said terms. One can investigate what "religion", "Islam" etc. means in a specific context by historicizing the demarcations and antagonisms which lead to the establishing of equivalential chains and yet acknowledge their precariousness, since any articulation implies an addition or subtraction to and thus a transformation of the chains of equivalence to a certain extent. At the same time, it allows for reflecting that such a historicization is no objective or neutral enterprise, openly admitting that studies such as Jacobsen's (as well as Eulberg's and my own paper too) are driven by concrete interests (to critique hegemonic discourses about migrants/refugees, Islam, Hinduism, and religion) and as such do not occur from "a place outside power" (Butler 1995:138).

Another benefit is that this perspective allows us to study the refugees as agents, i.e. as people who are not just passive victims or passive objects of discrimination, but also active subjects. This can be illustrated by Jacobsen's interviews with the Atheist looking to make friends, who started to go to the Mosque in order to socialize, and the Atheist who started to defend practicing Muslims, even if he used to take the opposite stance before migrating to Germany. What is clear from her analysis, is that both interlocutors had to relate to the empty signifiers dominating the discourse ("Muslim" versus "German") in order to claim an identity for themselves. But furthermore, both interlocutors reproduced the boundaries between the two groups, even if this was a subversive act that unmasked the inability of the "Germans" to imagine a refugee who identifies as Atheist.

Rather than victimizing refugees or engaging in a strategic essentialism (see Spivak 1988; see also: Krämer 2018) this perspective allows for theorizing the agency on the side of those who occupy a subaltern position in the studied discourse. It takes the differences seriously that are found also among those who are regarded as subaltern (including their different interests). Attending a mosque as an Atheist can be seen as both, as a subversive act and critique of the politics of stereotypes found in the "host society", and as a critique of practices performed in the mosque from a position of superiority. Thus, Jacobsen is right here to refrain from resorting to concepts like 'multiple religious identities' [5] and to leave it open whether this might result in the Atheist influencing the practitioners or

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[3] Otherwise there would be no tertium comparationis allowing to set both sides in relation to each other; both entities would be incommensurable. From this perspective, instead of limiting oneself to the, perhaps, too vague statement that there is a suppression of diversity at work, which seems constitutive for creating a "group identity", I suggest to speak of a subversion of differences into equivalences through the making of equivalential chains (see below).

[4] The positive chain of equivalence operates on the base of the same logics as the negative chain does and is no less precarious (one could add "blond", "punctual", "hard working" etc.). From this perspective, the signifier identifying the host society is empty, not because it has no meaning whatsoever, but because its meaning is overdetermined: it can have a variety of meanings and it can be transformed, depending on who is going to be expelled or included from the "we" (Laclau 1996a; Bergunder 2014:266; Maltese 2019:18, see also Stäheli and Hammer 2016:72). This becomes clear if one looks at the way "Christian values" have been transformed into "Judeo-Christian values" to qualify what "German" represents (Homolka 2017:111; cf. Silk 1984).

vice-versa in the first example, and whether or not the defense offered by the Atheist in the second example did result in a paternalist act stemming from a sense of superiority and from a denial of rationality to religion. In any case, a future “cultural Islam” formed by “non Muslims” will probably contribute to further redefining the notion of Islam and religion in the German context.

If, therefore, “‘religion’, ‘culture’, and ‘nationality’ (or ‘ethnicity’) are labels that should be seen as non-natural categories of difference” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 17), this approach helps to theorize the conditions for their plausibility among refugees, scholars and other social actors. Most telling is the anecdote of the Christmas tree that Jacobsen mentions: Does the tree represent religion or culture, and who decides where to draw the boundary? A study of the negotiations that are based on concrete demarcations embedded in antagonisms allows for describing the boundary drawing in its precariousness, as it allows for including how the same “empty signifiers” religion or culture are used to contest that very boundary work. To be clear, such an approach has nothing to do with cultural relativism or radical constructivism. This is so because referencing these empty signifiers – by interlocutors and scholars – does not occur in a socio-political vacuum. Rather, in order to be meaningful, such referencing follows sedimented practices, which can be studied as the conditions for using labels such as “religion,” “culture”, etc. in a specific way and yet subverting their meaning by citing them in a new contextual situation. Put differently, the use of said labels is subject to certain discursive constraints that can be studied as the history of the names “religion”, “culture” etc.

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In turning to a non-essentialist conceptualization of religion, Jacobsen suggests that the statements of her interlocutors were political in the sense that the interlocutors refused to be excluded from defining religion or to leave it up to the researcher, but claimed their right to participate in the negotiation of what “religion” means as the research itself did. From this perspective, her argument complements Eulberg’s, and instigates future reflections on how religion scholars, studying these groups, willy-nilly affect the discourse on refugees and religion through the way they conceptualize religion and support or challenge policies towards them.

### 3. TOOLS FOR A RELIGION-SENSITIVE EDUCATION OF CONFLICT MANAGERS

Petra Tillessen’s section differs from the first two, as it is primarily a contribution to the field of applied religion studies. Her interest in recent debates regarding the conceptualization of religion and its import for conflict mediation, however, also represents a thread of continuity to the above. A practicing mediator herself, Tillessen observes that conflict management studies have so far been unable to translate newer reflections from religion studies into their own conceptual and practical work. This leads to the perpetuation of blind spots that are detrimental to the task of mediators. Put differently, her thesis is that most of the problems encountered by conflict mediators whenever conflict parties refer to religion or are accused to do so, have to do with the way religion is conceptualized. Against this background, Tillessen takes up the challenge of developing a “religion-sensitive” mediation (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20).

Currently, conflict managers and those teaching future mediators largely operate with

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[5] On my understanding of the “multiple religious identities”-paradigm and its relation to essentialist conceptualizations of religion, see my engagement with Tillessen found below.

outdated paradigms of religion that disregard “diversity”, “plurality”, and “flexibility” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20). While newer mediation approaches have started to question the “idea of cultures as monolithic blocks” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 19), a similar shift has not occurred with regard to religion. Generally speaking, “‘religion(s)’ are [...] still treated as stable and self-contained entities” or as “a ‘unique phenomenon’”, understood as “not easily rationalized” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 19). Mediators therefore run the risk of projecting onto the conflicts their respective experiences with or understanding of what they know as religious groups and may reproduce stereotypes. At the same time, conflicts articulated with reference to religion appear to be not intelligible, unless they are translated into the “more rational or reasonable” languages of “other social spheres” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20).

On the basis of this diagnosis, Tillessen sets out to develop an approach that takes into serious consideration major insights emerging from recent controversies about the subject matter of religion studies: (1) Religions are to be understood not as “homogenous, monolithic blocks”, but by taking into account “plurality and range of variations within religions”. (2) The religious individual might have in itself plural or multiple religious identities, rather than one. (3) Religion as a generic term that subsumes all religions (plural) is no “clearly delineated object”. Rather, “its possible differentiation in a particular historical situation is the result of differentiating discourses” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20). “Diversity, plurality, and flexibility” therefore point to an alternative approach, but, as Tillessen argues, some kind of stability is still needed. This is because people, both in mediation contexts and beyond, still keep on referring to religion in general or to specific religions, such as Islam or Christianity to articulate their identity and attitudes.

To solve this tension “between flexibility [...] and stability”, Tillessen suggests that conflict mediators treat knowledge about “religion/s” as “flexible facts” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 21–22). She develops this notion with reference to Michael Bergunder and Judith Butler and their concepts of “contingency” and “sedimented iterability” respectively. According to Tillessen’s reading, the word religion never had a single meaning that was stable, but many meanings depending on the historical and cultural context. The repeated use of “religion” in the context of ascription processes, which owes itself to contingent conditions, made the practice of using the word religion in certain circumstances become a conventional practice, assuming that it represented an anthropological constant or a social sphere *sui generis* that was heterogenous and plural but still identifiable as such. Thus, what made today’s word “religion” appear to have a fixed and natural relation with a specific phenomenon, which remained relatively constant, although that phenomenon may undergo different variations through time and space, was a social practice, rather than a natural given. The current discourse about religion is the result of a practice of iteration, whose performativity resulted in the sedimentation of the assumption that religion referred to a fixed entity. This is also the reason why the word religion is ambivalent and eschews unambiguous definitions – it is flexible in that it may stand for different and even contradicting things.

Tillessen does not stop at this abstract discussion, but provides three hands-on exercises, designed as role plays, which are intended to clarify the concept of “flexible facts”. Moreover, they are intended to demonstrate the applicability of her approach in the context of a “religion-sensitive mediation” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20). The break with preconceived notions of religion is condensed in her key-questions for the exercises: “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?” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 22). Her first exercise, “My Groups”, introduces the concept of “multireligious identities” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 23). The second exercise, “Labels”, focusses on how ascriptions affect the way people act and perceive themselves. In the third exercise, “You As a Mus-

lim...”, Tillessen aims at showing how precarious the borders between culture, religion/s etc. are. The three exercises thus correspond to the three major insights emerging from the recent controversies about the subject of religion studies and to the analyzed blind spot of conflict mediation in regard to diversity, plurality, and flexibility.

Tillessen’s section demonstrates that theory, understood as the critical reflection of the premises underlying conceptualizations of “religion” is highly relevant to the practical problems encountered by conflict mediators whenever conflict parties refer to religion (or are suspected to do so). In light of the scholarly controversies about the subject matter of religion studies, I think she is right in pointing to scholars who work with poststructuralist theories of discourse. She seems to maintain that the three insights she highlights represent a consensus in “contemporary approaches in the academic study of religion/s”, or at least among the scholars and works she makes exemplary mention of: Adrian Hermann and Jürgen Mohn (2015); Michael Stausberg (2012); Michael Bergunder (2011); Burkhard Gladigow (1995); Hans G. Kippenberg (1995). Yet to pool these authors together, I argue, implies the danger of obscuring the originality and radicality of their reflections. Take for example Bergunder’s work, which she refers to as a main source of her theoretical framework. The originality of his approach lies in the radical critique of an essentialist understanding of religion and in his suggestion to regard religion as an “empty signifier”, as a “name” that can be historicized in a consistent poststructuralist and postfoundationalist discourse theory as the “subject matter of religious studies” (Bergunder 2011; for an English version of this paper, see Bergunder 2014). From this perspective, religion should never be treated as a “clearly delineated object” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 20) but always as a product of antagonistic claims, which can only be studied as a history of global entanglements (Bergunder 2014:261–265). This has implications for Tillessen’s first hands-on exercise that builds on the concept of ‘multiple religious identities’ or “multireligious identities” (Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen 2019: 23). If religion is the product of negotiations, then any deviation from a (stereotypic) attitude that is attributed to a specific religion by others, should not induce us to frame that deviation along the concept ‘multiple religious identities’ or “multireligious identities”, but as a claim to participate in said negotiation.

Maybe Tillessen’s third exercise (“You as a Muslim”) might help us trace a way of deciding between the various, in part contradicting approaches that she cites as examples for contemporary approaches in the academic study of religion. This simulation game focuses on the fluidity of the boundaries between what is understood as religion, what is understood as culture etc. in a concrete situation. It reiterates Jacobsen’s argument that “religion” is to be viewed as a negotiation process taking place in a social context marked by power asymmetries. Thus, this exercise is fully consistent with Tillessen’s concern to dispense with essentialist ways of conceptualizing religion and could serve as an orientation for her future work on a religious sensitive approach for conflict mediation.

## 4. A NON-ESSENTIALIST CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELIGION: SKETCHING A FRAMEWORK

The common thread of Eulberg's, Jacobsen's, and Tillessen's quite different approaches could be summed up in this way: their data and discussions of labeling understood as ascription processes retrieved in relation to migration (and operationalized in the context of conflict mediation) suggest that religion is the precarious product of negotiations occurring in social contexts marked by power asymmetries. In other words, they suggest that any talk of religion is constitutively embedded in complex performances of identity-making taking place vis-à-vis concrete discursive positions. Such identity-making does not occur in a social vacuum, but owes itself to power relations which are the product of a global entangled history. This begs for a theoretical framework that is capable of considering the various aspects mentioned. In the following I will give a sketch of the framework that guided my reading, critical remarks and comments presented above.

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### 4.1 EPISTEMOLOGY: DISCOURSE, SIGNIFICATION, AND ONTOLOGICAL STATUS

The theoretical framework I envision here follows Michael Bergunder's (2014) approach to conceptualize "religion" in a non-essentialist way. Bergunder draws from the works of political theorists Laclau, Mouffe, and Butler who built on Michel Foucault's discourse-studies. Hence, they operate with an inclusive notion of discourse, which is not limited to verbal speech but views discourse as the ensemble of words, action, institutions, rules etc. which shapes the way people think, speak and act. [6] The starting point is the observation that words can be "filled" with different meanings, depending on the context. Put differently, words, or better signifiers, such as "religion", "Islam", "ethnicity", "Hindu", or "culture" can mean (signify) a variety and even contradicting things to different people, even if all these meanings seem to draw from a global discourse which underwent a major transformation in the mid 19th century (Bergunder 2014:268, 280). Drawing on Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist semiotics, Laclau and Mouffe (2001:112–113) theorize this by conceptualizing language as an infinite "play of differences" (Laclau 2007:68). Like any signification system, they understand language as a system that is constituted by a radical openness. From this perspective "there are no positive terms in language, only differences – something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else" (Laclau 2007:69). A word or action is what it is only through its being different from other possible actions and signifying elements (words or actions) (Laclau 2007:69). In poststructuralist terminology, there is no stable, naturally given outside which signifying elements draw their meaning from – there is no "fixed[...] link between signifier and signified" (Bush 2009:49; Derrida 1976:27–73, esp. 50). Consequently, 'religion', 'culture', or 'Islam' etc. have no "ontological status" (Bergunder 2014:263). This begs the question: how is communication (words and actions) possible, then? In the "absence of the transcendental signified (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:112; see also Derrida 1976:50), meaning is only possible if the "infinite play" is given a limit; if the "floating" of the elements is "arrested" (Laclau and

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[6] This is in contrast to a Habermasian notion of discourse that focuses on verbal articulations (Stäheli and Hammer 2016:68; cf. Habermas 1981).

Mouffe 2001:112–113). If “there is no beyond the play of differences, no ground which would a priori privilege some elements of the whole over the others”, the fact that a certain element acquires meaningfulness, “has to be explained by the play of differences as such” (Laclau 2007:69). In other words, the limit that arrests the “infinite play” must come from within the “differential ensemble” (Laclau 2007:69). Consequently, the only possible way for arresting the floatation and giving the discourse a limiting outside is this: one of the differences is expelled and comes to represent pure negativity. [7] Signification, therefore, is not dependent on a transcendental entity, but is the result of expulsion. Yet expulsion is not only the condition for the possibility of signification, it is also the condition for the possibility of the subversion of signification. In other words, the operation of expulsion is the condition for the impossibility of final or absolute signification (Laclau 2007:70). In sum, the limit of the discourse brought forth through expulsion is always partial, it is always on the brink to collapse. Put differently signification is always precarious, signifiers are ambivalent and may even mean contradictory things. This raises the question: How does a discursive element qualify for becoming the expelled element that represents pure negativity?

## 4.2 THE POLITICAL: HEGEMONY, IDENTITY, AND EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

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In order to analyze the dynamics of expulsion, Laclau introduces the concepts of hegemony and of the political. Since signification does not occur in a social vacuum (words can only have meaning for people in time and space) and since no sociality is free from asymmetries, a study of how discursive limits and signification become effective has to take into account power dynamics. Yet, the said expulsion cannot follow predetermined paths, as this would reintroduce structuralism in the epistemological framework mentioned above and impose a fixation from outside of the discourse. In other words, the expulsion of a discursive element is contingent. Thus, Laclau suggests to conceptualize any expulsion on the level of signifiers as embedded in antagonisms [8] of various kinds. Expulsion (and signification) is an operation of power, a hegemonic act (Marchart 2010:199–205; Stäheli and Hammer 2016:74–75). [9] If one is to take sociality as the precondition of meaning serious, then any investigation of what signifiers (words etc.) mean to people (contextualisation) cannot be detached from the question of identity-making. To recap, if meaning depends on the production of an outside and if this operation is always no more than a partial fixation leading to the precariousness of the specific meaning of a signifier, then any discourse community thrives for stabilizing the limits that represent its outside. Responsible for this operation of stabilization, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is a “logics of difference and equivalence” (Laclau 2007:x, 69–70). Within a plurality of different people, who are em-

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[7] The outside of the discourse is “something that the totality of elements expels from itself in order to constitute itself (to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion)” (Laclau 2007:70).

[8] In this sense, antagonism/antagonistic is to be understood as vis-à-vis-ness embedded in a social context constituted by power asymmetries. It does not imply a Carl Schmittian political theory (Neher 2014).

[9] Hegemony here does not mean absolute predominance dependent on coercive tools. Rather it is a form of dominance that depends on the ruler’s success to convince those ruled to accept the ruler’s authority. Building on Antonio Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (2001:139) argue that a “hegemonic formation also embraces what opposes it, insofar as the opposing force accepts the system of basic articulations of that formation as something it negates”. The hegemon, thus, is always required to stabilize the influence by which conviction can be achieved; alas the dominance of the hegemon is permanently under threat of subversion and on the brink to collapse. Against this background and as will become clear in the following, populism is not a “type of movement” but a “political logic” as it rests on the “logics of equivalence and difference” that is operative in any endeavor that aims at successful mobilization (Laclau 2007: 117, 200).

bedded in a context marked by asymmetries and have contradicting interests, differences must be converted into equivalences through the expulsion of one particular element. This particular element comes to embody a radical difference – a pure negativity vis-à-vis all other elements are equal and hence able to constitute themselves as a community in and for itself (Laclau 2007:68–70). This is what Laclau (1996b:36–46; cf. 2007:69–72, 101–117) calls the making of an “empty signifier” – a signifier which is not empty in the sense that it has no meaning, but in the sense that it allows a plurality of particular positions to identify with a particular struggle on the promise that it will meet the totality of their particular interests. As such, an empty signifier identifies anything that threatens this struggle as a clear antagonist and produces a “we” – an operation which Laclau (2007:65) calls “constructing the ‘people’”.

In sum, Laclau sees signification and identity-making as co-constitutive. Both rest on the logics of equivalence and difference that need empty signifiers to keep the chains of particular elements, converted into positive or negative equivalences, together. The making of empty signifiers can be studied through an analysis of antagonistic dynamics [10] which represent the context of the research. As such, they can be assessed as the place where *the political* [11] becomes graspable as they give raise to counter-hegemonic identity formations that are embedded in antagonisms and contest discursive constrains and the fixation of identities.

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#### 4.3 HISTORICITY: SEDIMENTATION, CITATION, AND AGENCY

If the making of an empty signifier is contingent, i.e. not depending on predetermined structural factors – as this would reintroduce an unwarranted fixation or an arresting that depends on something outside the discourse (which the epistemological and semiotic framework presented here rejects) – is it then arbitrary in a relativistic sense? If this were the case, scholarly investigation would be redundant. Therefore, the constitution of discursive limits and identity by means of expulsion and empty signifiers has to be understood as contingent but not arbitrary in the sense that anything stands for anything. While anything could stand for anything theoretically, empirically any articulation has to interact with given discursive limitations and fixations of identity, partial and precarious as they might be. Hence, the more compelling question is: What place does agency have in this framework? Or more specifically: How do we contextualize articulations related to Religion, Islam, Tamil Hindu Migrants, Refugees etc.? How do we assess what “religion”, “Islam”, “ethnicity”, “Hindu”, or “culture” actually means? How do these words represent empty signifiers that represent an attempt to give the discourse a definite fixation, by setting discursive limits, include certain identities and exclude others, and how are these limits contested (e.g. through forging alliances between self-declared Atheist refugees and

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[10] The focus on antagonism owes itself to a specific “cognitive interest” (Erkenntnisinteresse, Habermas 1972:310) and to an understanding of scholarship that follows Immanuel Kant’s notion of enlightenment and regards academic research as an emancipatory task based on an ethos of critique; as epitomized by Foucault’s reformulation of the Kantian questions: “How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?” (Foucault 1984:49). To put it Butler’s words: “The critic thus has a double task, to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a [...] systematic way of ordering the world with its own ‘conditions of acceptability of a system,’ and ‘to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence’. So it is not enough to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things. Rather, it is necessary to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities [...]. [...]ne looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted as well as the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability” (Butler 2004:216).

[11] On Laclau’s distinction between the political in contrast to politics and the social, see the comprehensive study by Oliver Marchart (2010:203–205; Laclau 1999:146; Maltese 2019:18).

devoted Mosque goers, or Tamil Hindu groups with Islamophobic Swiss publics)? This is where Judith Butler's notion of sedimentation is helpful.

For Butler (1990:145), agency is "located within the possibility of a variation on [...] repetition" of signifying discursive elements. [12] To stress repetition, in this view, means to take serious that "there is no possibility of standing outside the discursive conventions by which 'we' are constituted, but only the possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled" (Butler 1995:135). Furthermore, it builds on the poststructuralist rejection of a transcendental signified (Bush 2009:49), discussed above, which means that no linguistic representation is identical with itself (Bergunder 2014:261–262; Laclau and Mouffe 2001:112–113; Laclau 2007:69). As "there is no pure place outside of power" (Butler 1995:138), both the researcher and the researched are "neither fully determined by language nor radically free to instrumentalize language as an external medium" (Butler 1995:134). Discursive "structures" are "ontologically incomplete entities that can never fully determine the identity of agents, or their ability to act" (Glynos and Howarth 2008:164).

Thus, this approach rejects "both intentionalist and structuralist responses" to the so-called "structure–agency dichotomy" and "seeks instead to radicalize dialectical accounts by problematising the residual dualism in [...] structuration theory and [...] critical realism" (Glynos and Howarth 2008:164). In other words, "rather than prioritising totalised and determining social structures, [...] on the one hand, or fully constituted subjects on the other [...] we should begin by accepting that social agents always find themselves [...] 'thrown into' a system of meaningful practices [...] which both shapes their identity and structures their practices" (Glynos and Howarth 2008:164). Accordingly, the power of citation, rather than being "a function of an individual's intention" existing prior to and independently from the citation, is an "effect" of the historically "sedimented linguistic conventions" which by their very repetition bring the subject into "being" (Butler 1995:134). This is what Butler calls the "performative act" operating retroactively. In sum, agency thus becomes graspable as "resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within" (Butler 1995:134).

## 4.4 METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

From this, we can draw the following conclusions. Empty signifiers are not created out of nothing, but rest on sedimented practices which include unquestioned – albeit highly precarious – antagonisms (Bergunder 2014:261–262). Simply put, they are brought forth as citation and can be studied as names which contest the fixation of discursive boundaries and identity-limits in the realm of the political. The theoretical and epistemological framework presented here can contribute to an alternative approach to those operating with preconceived notions of "religion" that presuppose that the objects behind have an ontological status, or with nominal-essentialist definitions that assume a fixed link between signifier and signification and tend to regard "religion" etc. as something *sui generis*. Rather, it allows to study "religion", "culture", "Islam", "Hindu" etc., as "names" or "identity markers" (Bergunder 2014:265–266; Maltese 2018:154–155, 2019:15–19). To paraphrase Bergunder (2014:257–273), this translates into a radical historicization that should be understood as a "history of a name". A critical reconstruction of the discourse in which these debates take place allows us to handle the various, at times contradictory meanings, without privileging one over the other. The decidedly critical thrust, in this understanding, has

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[12] Using Stuart Hall's (1990:225) words, one could say that agency is located in the possibility of the resignification of "names" by which respondents "are positioned and position" themselves "within the narratives of the past" in a social context constituted by inequalities and power asymmetries.

nothing to do with postmodern arbitrariness, nor relativism. On the contrary, it takes a very specific position as its point of departure out of which the particularity of truths can be claimed in a meaningful way – the “insight into contingency opens up space [...] for transformations” (Bergunder 2014:275). In the words of Butler (2004:216), critique means to look “both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, as well as the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability.”

Studying religion and politics by investigating the conditions of possibility of repetition, citation, and re-contextualization of central key-words and categories organically leads us to ask for the antagonisms, exclusions, and (counter-)hegemonic formations in their global entanglements. Consequently, it would not regard actors whose articulations of “religion”, “Islam” etc. contests dominant understandings of religion, Islam etc. as representing a deviation, because these alleged deviations are seen as an instance of resignification performed by the “citation” of the very same “names” (Butler 1995:134–135). This allows us to ask for the interests and mechanisms of exclusion that both analytical categories and our interlocutors’ key-words serve.

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Methodically speaking, such an approach would operate along the following lines. First and as already pointed to above, we need to ask, who uses these words, where, vis-à-vis which group, since when, interacting with whom, and in demarcation to whom? Then, we need to reconstruct the chains of equivalences, starting from a clearly delineable context: What are the names that are regarded as equivalent and otherwise related to “religion”? From this, we need to historicize “religion” by reconstructing the various chains of equivalence it was a name for, i.e. studying what elements were added or subtracted from them by whom, when, where, whereto etc. This means to discuss the conditions that make them plausible in the context of antagonisms and hegemonic instances with a decisive focus on the global entanglements that constitute said antagonisms.

In the light of this theoretical framework, the task of a scholar of religion is to study the history of the use of religion as a name for different chains of equivalence in the context of power and hegemonic struggles and thus provide data for a theoretically reflected and methodologically transparent comparison. From this perspective, the case studies by Eulberg, Jacobsen, and Tillessen collected in the FIW working paper discussed here do an excellent job in inviting us to study the various instances of how religion is cited and thus reinvented ever and ever again according to the actors’ interests and compare these instances, taking into account that both the researched and researcher cannot stand outside the discourse.

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