

Rethinking Religionization: A Philosophical Inquiry from a Muslim Perspective

Abstract

This article critically engages with Marianne Moyaert's recent book, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* (2024), extending her concept of religionization through dialogue with Charles Taylor's idea of authenticity, as well as with an account of processes of religious boundary-setting within Islam. It argues that the notion of »religion« likely arose not solely from Western Christian thought, but through the lived experience of interreligious encounters within societies. Moreover, the article introduces a distinction between hermeneutical and political religionization, showing how the former aids understanding, while the latter enforces power.

Keywords

religionization, interreligious dialogue, secularity, authenticity, *dīn*, *millah*, Muslim-Christian encounters

Religionalisierung neu denken: Eine philosophische Untersuchung aus islamischer Perspektive

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel setzt sich kritisch mit dem Buch *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* (2024) von Marianne Moyaert auseinander und erweitert ihr Konzept der Religionisierung durch einen Dialog mit Charles Taylors Idee der Authentizität sowie mit einer Darstellung von Prozessen religiöser Grenzziehung innerhalb des Islams. Er argumentiert, dass der Begriff »Religion« wahrscheinlich nicht ausschließlich aus dem westlich-christlichen Denken hervorgegangen ist, sondern sich durch die gelebte Erfahrung interreligiöser Begegnungen innerhalb von Gesellschaften entwickelt hat. Darüber hinaus führt der Artikel eine Unterscheidung zwischen *hermeneutischer* und *politischer* Religionisierung ein und zeigt, wie erstere das Verstehen ermöglicht, während letztere der Machtausübung dient.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Religionisierung, interreligiöser Dialog, Säkularität, Authentizität, *dīn*, *millah*, muslimisch-christliche Begegnungen

Sumario

Este artículo analiza críticamente el libro *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* (2024) de Marianne Moyaert y amplía su concepto de »religionización« mediante un diálogo con la idea de autenticidad de Charles Taylor, así como con una descripción de los procesos de delimitación religiosa dentro del islam. El autor sostiene que el término »religión«

probablemente no surgió exclusivamente del pensamiento cristiano occidental, sino que se desarrolló a través de la experiencia vivida de los encuentros interreligiosos dentro de las sociedades. Además, el artículo introduce una distinción entre religiosización hermenéutica y política, y muestra cómo la primera permite la comprensión, mientras que la segunda sirve para ejercer el poder.

Palabras clave

religiosización, diálogo interreligioso, secularidad, autenticidad, *dīn*, *millah*, encuentros entre musulmanes y cristianos

In her insightful and thought-provoking book, Marianne Moyaert undertakes a reflective analysis of the history of Western Christianity's encounters with other religious and theological groups, with a particular focus on the patterns of »selfing« and »othering« that occurred through such encounters, starting with »heretics, Jews, and pagans«, and later extending to Muslims. Moyaert explores these processes of »selfing« and »othering«, taking place through mechanisms of naming, categorization and classification, essentialization and governance, within a broader context of a phenomenon she terms »religionization«.¹ The contribution of Moyaert's study to the field of interreligious dialogue is significant, as her analysis highlights how religionization by imposing rigid categories and constructed imaginations on the religious other, hinders constructive dialogue and a genuine openness toward the other required for such dialogue.

Religionized Self, Authentic Self

Most often, however, this religious other at the dialogue table not merely confronts essentialization, classification and governance from outside, but also has concerns about one's role as the *representative* of a religious tradition in the face of the people with whom she or he shares that tradition. In other words, it is not that one is merely pushed by the dialogue partner toward fitting into certain norms and categories, but that the responsibility that one feels toward one's religious community also functions as a factor from within that pushes the person in one of the two following directions: either to fit into certain norms that have emerged from the heart of her religious tradition – although the person herself at an individual level may not consider those norms to apply for her own religiosity –, or to leave the dialogue table due to her ambivalence concerning her role as an adequate representative of her religious tradition. This complex condition of the religious person in the twenty-first century may be well explained by what Charles Taylor describes as the defining feature of our *age of authenticity*. Taylor's approach to the concept of authenticity is a very subtle one. By authenticity he means, above all, the general idea that there is a certain original way of being human for every human individual, and they are morally obliged to live their life in this way, and not by imitating anyone else's way of being.² In his approach toward this concept, Taylor, admitting that authenticity is indeed a »moral ideal«, distances himself from both »boosters« and »knockers« of the »culture of authenticity«. First of all, he positions himself against the boosters by questioning their optimism regarding the idea that our modern sense of being – that is, as individuals with unique identity markers having absolute control over their choices – is inherently authentic and it should be boosted as it is. Simultaneously, he disagrees with »the

¹ MARIANNE MOYAERT, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization*, Hoboken 2024, 4-6

² CHARLES TAYLOR, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1991 (11th printing 2003), 28f.

cultural pessimism of the knockers« who view whatever the modern individual identifies as one's authentic way of being »as illusion or narcissism«. ³ Rather than proposing a middle position or a simple balance between the two aforementioned standpoints, Taylor calls for a retrieval – or more precisely, a redefinition – of authenticity as a conscious and responsible interplay between originality and self-creation, on the one hand, and openness to pre-given horizons of significance, on the other. ⁴ This is a process that Taylor views as necessarily involving other human beings, as he argues that the very formation of human identity is rooted in dialogical relations:

»My discovering my identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition.« ⁵

By introducing Taylor's concept of authenticity as a defining feature of our age, I aim to highlight the complex situation of the contemporary religious subject – one who is embedded within a specific religious context, shaped by both internal norms and external perceptions, while also navigating the broader cultural ethos of authenticity. I thereby seek not to oppose but to complement Moyaert's genealogy of the religio-secular divide in the Western imagination by a parallel view of the concept of the secular as introduced by Taylor. While Moyaert insightfully reveals how the concept of religious other in our modern world is constructed through asymmetrical power structures defining what counts as religious and what as secular, Taylor's account of the secular as a space in which the very conditions of belief are genuinely questioned and transformed provides a more complex image of the reality, in which religious individuals negotiate their identities not merely *in reaction to* external constructs, but also through an internal, dialogical striving for meaningful »self-making« or »self-choice«. ⁶ In other words, following Taylor's definition of a secular age as one in which being religious is a matter of choice, the contemporary religious persons – confronted with complex shifts in the conditions of belief, compared to those assumed in the traditional sources of their religion – are already situated in a context that demands, both internally and externally, an authentic justification for their choice to live as religious subjects. If one takes Taylor's analysis of human identity as indispensably constituted through dialogue, one cannot deny the fact that the (re)formation of a modern individual's religious identity is inseparable from the dialogue they hold with both fellow believers and their (ir)religious others – and, as a result, inevitably passes through processes of religionization.

Hermeneutical and/or Political Religionization?

By grounding the modern notion of »religion« in the imperial project of Christian Europe, Moyaert convincingly exposes the asymmetrical conditions under which interreligious dialogue in the West has historically taken place. However, this framing risks presenting the self-identification of religious others – particularly within dialogical settings – as primarily

³ Ibid., 22f, 79f.

⁴ Ibid., 39, 66.

⁵ Ibid., 47f. The concept of recognition (Anerkennung) in the Western philosophical tradition can be traced back to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who was likely the first philosopher to explicitly underscore its significance for the development of human (self-)consciousness. Subsequent elaborations of that concept, particularly in Hegel's philosophy, are profoundly indebted to Fichte's foundational insights.

⁶ Ibid., 39-41; CHARLES TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA-London 2007, 505-535.

reactive to Christianity, shaped either by the internalization of, or »talking back« to, Christian imaginations.

In order to avoid such a consequence, I would like to propose a practical distinction between religionization »as a hermeneutical process of selfing and othering«, as Moyaert herself has very well formulated,⁷ and religionization as the adoption of a normative stance and a political attitude toward the religious other with »real and material effects on people's lives«⁸. This distinction already shows itself in the four mechanisms of religionization Moyaert has proposed. While naming and categorization/classification are interpretive operations that make human understanding possible – and which, when applied to the religious other, result in what I would describe as religionization in a hermeneutical sense – essentialization and governance, but most often also *renaming*, involve the adoption of an evaluative stance toward the religious other, with political consequences for them, particularly in contexts characterized by unequal power structures, as Moyaert's book compellingly demonstrates. The key point I am trying to make here is the fact that the adoption of these latter attitudes is not a necessary consequence of the first two mechanisms, and that religionization in the first sense, namely, as a hermeneutical process, appears to be indispensable not only to human understanding of the religious other, but also to discovering one's own identity, which, to speak with Taylor, occurs through dialogical relations.

This approach to the concept of religionization might, at first glance, appear politically naïve compared to Moyaert's ground-breaking genealogy of that concept in the Western context. Nevertheless, at least at one point, it seems that this analysis, which contextualizes the problem within an exclusively Christian framework, risks overlooking the possibility that such boundary-setting and self-identification through negation may also be meaningfully undertaken by members of other religious traditions, from whose perspective identifying oneself as religious others in relation to Christianity, that is, as non-Christians, could make perfect sense:

»In *Nostra Aetate*, the other religions are still grouped together, with further differentiation but based on what they are not, hence the label »non-Christian«. This is a negative label, **which makes sense only from a Christian perspective** [emphasis by me].«⁹

The concern I wish to highlight here is that a lack of distinction between religionization as a hermeneutical process and religionization as a governing political attitude can inadvertently lead to portraying the politically underprivileged as also hermeneutically disempowered.

The above-quoted text continues:

»Significantly – and this testifies to the power of interfaith dialogue and being in the proximity of the other – the inadequacy of this label would become increasingly clear, and the label »non-Christian« is now hardly used.«¹⁰

But does the decreasing use of the term »non-Christian« in interreligious settings necessarily points to its inadequacy or lack of sense from the perspective of the religious others in relation to Christianity? Or might there be another reason for the decline of this label today? Could it be that there is a sense of interreligious hospitality at work that prevents one from labelling the religious other as a *non-...*? If one conceives of interreligious dialogue, as it is perceived today, as an act of mutual hospitality between dialogue partners, then the use of such terms as non-

⁷ MOYAERT, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 307.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Christian, non-Muslim, non-Jew, etc. might violate the ethos of hospitality. Just as a host family would never address their guests with terms that suggest their non-belonging to the family. Nevertheless, as noted above, Moyaert's subtle genealogical account of religionization offers a significant contribution to fostering a more self-aware and critically reflective participation in interreligious dialogue, particularly by drawing attention to the political dynamics that could historically shape the ways that members of different religions in different societies with different power structures relate to one another. Inspired by the critical awareness her work raises in Christian discourse, I would like to extend this reflection into a Muslim context by revisiting some of the earliest forms of »religionization« in the Muslim world. The aim of this exploration is to raise a similar awareness in Muslim interreligious discourse.

Islam and Religionization

a) Religionization and the Qur'an

To begin with, it should be admitted that Islam, emerging in the multireligious environment of the 7th-century Arabia, was already born into a »religionized« context. The Qur'an, speaking in terms of the categories familiar to its original audience, employs two distinct terms to refer to what was, by that time, recognized by its audience as »religion«: *dīn* and *millah*.

In his influential study, Mohsen Goudarzi argues that the Qur'anic use of the term *dīn* centres particularly on service of worship, or rituals associated with devotion to one or more deities. His argument builds on the use of the term *dīn* and the verb *dāna* in early Arabic literature, where they typically denote service or rendering service, and subjugation. Through a close analysis of the text of the Qur'an, he further examines how this understanding fits most Qur'anic occurrences of the term *dīn*.¹¹ Nicolai Sinai also, referring to the usage of the related terms in pre-Qur'anic Arabic literature, describes *dīn* as »communal cultic practice«.¹²

The other term the Qur'an applies to refer to what was recognized back then as »religion« is *millah*. This term is usually assumed to have etymologically descended from Syriac *melltā* or Aramaic *milta*, both of which mean »word« in the sense of *logos*.¹³ From here, one is tempted, as Nicolai Sinai at some point appears to be, to conclude that, while *dīn* refers to cultic practices associated with religions, *millah* covers the »doctrinal or credal dimension« of religion.¹⁴ Although Sinai is, at first, inclined to hold such a distinction based on the categories of belief and practice, the very text of the Qur'an, prevents him from elaborating further upon that speculation. Among the verses he mentions to demonstrate that the terms *millah* and *dīn* in their Qur'anic usage »are at least on a path to synonymity« are 6:161, where Abraham's *millah* is identified with an upright *dīn*, and 2:130, where Abraham's *millah* is associated with the rituals to take place in the Meccan sanctuary following him and Ishmael. Sinai then moves on to conclude:

»Hence, when Q 2:130 extols the *millah* of Abraham, it is contextually possible that the latter evokes not only monotheistic belief but also the faithful adherence to certain rituals linked to the Meccan sanctuary that God is assumed to have taught to Abraham. If this is

¹¹ MOHSEN GOUDARZI, Worship (*dīn*), Monotheism (*islām*), and the Qur'ān's Cultic Decalogue, in: Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association 8 (2023) 30-71. Also see, MOHSEN GOUDARZI, Unearthing Abraham's Altar: The Cultic Dimensions of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in the Qur'ān, in: Journal of Near Eastern Studies 82 (2023) 1-30.

¹² NICOLAI SINAI, Key Terms of the Qur'an. A Critical Dictionary, Princeton-Oxford 2023, 297.

¹³ Ibid., 648.

¹⁴ Ibid., 647f.

correct, then the degree to which *dīn* and *millah* foreground different dimensions of human religiosity should not be overstated.»¹⁵

A notable aspect of the Qur'anic usage of these two terms is that both are applied not only to monotheistic/Abrahamic religions, but also to beliefs and practices involving the worship of deities other than the God of the Qur'an. The titles of the earliest works written on other »religions«, in the Islamic scholarly history, suggest the ongoing lack of such a distinction in the application of these terms to monotheistic and non-monotheistic traditions in the centuries that followed.¹⁶ This however changed later in the history of Muslim engagement with other religions. We see, for example, in the 12th century, al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) distinguished between '*ahl milal wa adyān*' (the followers of creeds and religions), referring to the followers of recognized religions, and '*ahl ahwā' wa niḥal*' (the followers of desires and sects), a negative label he used for those adhering to traditions and schools of thought he did not recognize as true religion.¹⁷ The latter group included philosophers – namely, the naturalists (*al-tabī'īyyūn*), the eternalist atheists (*al-dahrīyyūn*), and the Sophists – as well as the Hindus, »the Arabs of the *jāhiliyya*« and the Sabaeans of Harrān (Mesopotamia).¹⁸ To the former category, on the other hand, alongside the Muslims, belonged the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians (*al-majūs*), all of whom the Qur'an acknowledges as recipients of eschatological reward, on the condition that they believe in God and the Day of Judgment and perform righteous actions (Q 2:62; 5:69).¹⁹

Although, as I previously mentioned, one could say that the Qur'an, emerging in the multi-religious context of the 7th-century Arabia, already faced a religionized social structure and had to play the language games that fit that religionized context, one could not deny the fact that it participated even actively in a process of religionization, by renaming, classifying and categorizing existing religious groups. This occurred both through the introduction of new terms – such as *mushrikūn* (pagans), *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the Book), and *ahl al-'injīl* (people of the Gospel) – and through the use of pre-existing labels like *banū isrā'īl*, *yahūd* (or *hūd*), and *naṣārā*, the latter two of which, according to Sinai's research and observation, are external labels for Jews and Christians rather than their own self-identifications.²⁰ Sinai mentions further that the same double identification of Jews as both *banū Isrā'īl* and *Yahūd* is found in Himyarite inscriptions. This observation is significant for our investigation of religionization in the Islamic context. While the Qur'an applies the term *banū Isrā'īl* in Mecca, it is only in Medina – further north, and thus further from the Himyarite kingdom – that it starts referring to the Jews as *al-Yahūd*. Could the formation of Muslim identity, their self-definition as a new religious group with their own direction of prayer, distinct from that of the Jews, have led to the Qur'an's intentional application of a term that was considered as an external label to refer to the Jews, although the awareness of such terminology must have already existed in the Meccan period?

Moreover, the Qur'an's introduction of the category of *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the Book) plays an additional, more subtle role in the early Muslim community's process of selfing and othering, to speak with Moyaert. While the dichotomy between *mushrikūn* (idolaters) and *mu'minūn* (believers) served to draw a clear boundary between the non-believers and the early

¹⁵ Ibid., 648.

¹⁶ Among such titles are, for example, *Milal al-Hind wa-adyānuhā* (The Creeds of India and its Religions) by Abū Muḥammad Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. c. 757), *Adyān al-'Arab* (The Religions of the Arabs) by Abū al-Mundhir Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 821), *Adyān al-'Arab* (The Religions of the Arabs) by Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāhiz (d. 869).

¹⁷ Abū al-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal* (The Book of Creeds and Sects), ed. AMĪR 'ALĪ MUḤANNĀ / 'ALĪ HASAN FĀ'ŪR, Beirut 1993, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 305.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Sinai, 730.

community of believers in the message of the Qur'an, the terms *ahl al-kitāb* and *ahl al-'injīl* were used to introduce a more nuanced dynamic to the relationship between that emerging community and their religious others – a relationship that both recognized a shared scriptural heritage and simultaneously marked the boundaries of religious belonging.²¹ One instance indicating this complex dynamic is the following:

»Say, ›O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.« Surely that which has been sent down unto thee from thy Lord will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief. So grieve not for disbelieving people. Truly those who believe [more literally: those who have come to faith, i.e., emerging community of believers], and those who are Jews [*alladhīna hādū*], and the Sabeans, and the Christians – whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve (Q 5:68-69)«

In light of Moyaert's reflections, it becomes clear that the Qur'an's engagement with the religious diversity of its environment not only involved the delineation of religious boundaries but also introduced categories that allowed for a more layered and dynamic relationship with religious others. The Qur'anic approach simultaneously affirmed a shared »horizon of significance« with previous communities while also asserting a distinct identity for the emerging community of believers by invoking Abraham and Ishmael and emphasizing their association with the Meccan sanctuary.²²

b) Post-Qur'anic Political Religionization in the 9th-century Baghdad

In the introduction to his translation of the treatise *Against the Incarnation* by Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq (d. 861/2), David Thomas offers an insightful view on the earliest forms of Muslim-Christian encounter in 9th-century Baghdad – an illustrative case with which I would like to conclude this article. Thomas's aim in his introduction is to explore and, drawing on later sources, to reconstruct the societal conditions under which Muslim polemic against Christianity, and vice versa, emerged in the early Abbasid cosmopolitan Baghdad.²³ What is of particular relevance to this article is that, in Thomas's reconstruction of Muslim-Christian relations within that multicultural political setting, alongside (re)naming, classification and categorization, the two other Religionization mechanisms associated above with what I distinguished as *political* religionization are clearly discerned. In such a setting, where Muslims had politically the upper hand, religionization was carried out on the Muslim side by 1. **governing** the place of Christians and other religious groups through discriminatory regulations attached to their status as *ahl al-dhimma*²⁴ (subjects under the protection pact)

²¹ As regards Christianity, one might ask whether Christians at the time of the Prophet could have identified with the title *ahl al-kitāb* in the first place – such that the kind of nuanced dynamic proposed here could have emerged at all. This question is particularly intriguing given that, for Christians, Christ himself has always constituted the central criterion of their self-identification, rather than any notion of »the Book« or scripture. Depending on how *al-kitāb* is understood – and if, following Mohsen Goudarzi, one assumes that it is not a label for all scriptures but an exclusive appellation for the Torah and the Qur'an (see: MOHSEN GOUDARZI, *The Second Coming of the Book. Rethinking Qur'anic Scripturology and Prophetology*, PhD diss., Harvard University 2018.) – then it becomes conceivable that mainstream Christians of that time could indeed have identified with the title, especially as a means of marking a clear distinction between themselves and Gnostic groups of the past centuries who denied any association of Christ with the God of the Torah.

²² See, MOHSEN GOUDARZI, *The Ascent of Ishmael: Genealogy, Covenant, and Identity in Early Islam*, in: *Arabica* 66, no. 5 (2019) 415-484

²³ DAVID THOMAS, *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity. Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's »Against the Incarnation«*, Cambridge 2002.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

(renaming?), and, as far as the case of the Christians was concerned 2. by fostering a constructed theological imagination of Christianity that would discredit any attempts to align Christian doctrines with Islamic theological concepts. Christians sought, for example, to use Muslim theological debates – such as those concerning the relation between Divine attributes and Divine essence – to defend the Trinity,²⁵ or drew analogies between Abraham’s friendship with God and Jesus’ sonship of God.²⁶ Muslims, however, firmly resisted such appropriations, perceiving them as threats to Islamic theological boundaries. This resistance represents a form of **essentialization** that sought to fix Christianity in a theologically incompatible position relative to Islam. On the other hand, Christians, living under Muslim rule also took »an ambivalent attitude« that both longed for integration into the majority society, and employed unfair means to trigger its sensitivities – what David Thomas describes as »the conflicting attitudes typical of a marginalized group, striving at once to identify with the mainstream culture and to preserve their own separate existence«.²⁷

Conclusion

By bringing Moyaert’s critical genealogy into dialogue with Taylor’s reflections on authenticity in a secular age as well as with the Qur’an’s and early Muslim community’s processes of religious boundary-setting, this article tried to offer a broader context of interreligious dynamics. Two following observations merit attention in this framework. First, the Qur’an’s deployment of distinct categories such as *dīn* and *millah*, along with the broader Islamic tradition’s engagement with religious diversity, deciding even – like indicated in the case of al-Shahrastānī – what to be called *dīn* or *millah* and what not, suggests that the concept of »religion« may not be solely a product of Western Christian imagination. Rather, I tend to view that concept emerging through the lived experience of encountering religious difference – a phenomenon that led different civilizations to develop shared conceptual frameworks for understanding others, and themselves.

Second, religionization itself may be understood as part of a broader social phenomenon linked to the variety of attitudes adopted by politically dominant groups toward minorities. As David Thomas’s account of early Muslim-Christian encounters in ninth-century Baghdad illustrates, beyond the theological content of debates between Muslims and Christians, the very structures of governance and discrimination imposed by Muslims on Christians and other religious groups compelled minority communities to adopt ambivalent strategies aimed at balancing integration into the dominant society with the preservation of distinct identities. Thomas characterizes such ambivalence as typical of marginalized groups more generally, whether marginalized by religion, race, social class, or other forms of structural inequality. Recognizing religionization as one variant of this broader pattern allows us to situate interreligious encounters within the wider dynamics of social negotiations and power relations, rather than viewing them exclusively through the lens of religious categorization. Nevertheless, Moyaert’s study remains crucial in demonstrating that religion carries a particular weight in such negotiations due to its historical role in shaping them.

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 9.