



Edited by Bernhard Reitsma  
and Erika van Nes-Visscher

# Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive?

A Religious Response

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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*Edited by  
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
1 Exclusion versus Inclusion: Searching for Religious Inspiration <i>Bernhard Reitsma</i>	9
2 A Humble Exclusivism? Reconstructing Exclusivism under Justificationist Rather than Bivalent Parameters <i>Dirk-Martin Grube</i>	25
3 Apostasy in Terms of Moral Deviance <i>Robert Ermers</i>	43
4 Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective <i>Jack Barentsen</i>	59
5 Deuteronomy 17:2–7 within the Context of Tanakh <i>Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk</i>	75
6 Otherness and Exile: Jesus’s Attitude towards Apostates and Outsiders <i>Henk Bakker</i>	87
7 Discerning the Body in 1 Corinthians 10: The Physical Negotiation of Exclusion and Inclusion by Paul as a Theologian of the Body <i>Peter-Ben Smit</i>	101
8 The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter <i>Jacobus (Kobus) Kok</i>	115
9 Hebrews, Deuteronomy, and Exclusion in the Early Church <i>Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte</i>	131
10 ‘Idolatry’ in Rabbinic Discussion: To Destroy, to Bury or Something Else? Some Observations on the Subject of ‘Idolatry’ in Rabbinic Questions and Answers on the Internet <i>Leo Mock</i>	147

11	<i>Al-walā'w' al-barā'</i> (Loyalty and Disavowal): Reconstructing a 'Creed' in the Muslim Hermeneutics of 'Otherness' <i>Yaser Ellethy</i>	163
12	Apostasy in Islam: An Overview of Sources and Positions <i>Razi H. Quadir</i>	183
13	Exclusionary Texts in 'A Common Word' <i>Gé Speelman</i>	201
14	Canaan and the New World: Native Americans Engage the Legacy of Exclusionary Readings <i>Eleonora Hof</i>	215
15	The Pela as a Model for Inclusive Peacebuilding <i>Simon Ririhena</i>	231
16	Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices within Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands <i>Laura Dijkhuizen and Jack Barentsen</i>	245
17	Religious Exclusivism, Social Inclusion: Missiological Reflections <i>Dorottya Nagy</i>	267
18	Religious Exclusivism, Social Inclusion: Theological Reflections <i>Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher</i>	289
	Index	303
	Index of Manuscripts	313

# Acknowledgements

The present volume *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response* is the fruit of a research project of scholars and academic researchers. Between exclusion and inclusion there exists a certain tension. To some extent all religions are exclusive, either in their view on salvation or in their outlook on society, as will be introduced in Chapter 1. Amid all kinds of challenges and conflicts between religious groups in our world today, this raises the question of whether it is possible for exclusive worldviews to live and work together for the common good of society. The focus of the inquiry was specifically on religious texts but developed from there into wider areas of research.

The research project was initiated by the Academic Chair 'The Church in the Context of Islam'. This chair aims to develop a Christian theology in the context of Islam, revolving around the theological challenges Islam presents for church and society today. The chair is currently positioned at the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Scholars from different institutions,<sup>1</sup> within different disciplines,<sup>2</sup> and from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim backgrounds participated in the research around whether religious exclusivism could go together with inclusive living in society.

After the research project came to an end, Dorottya Nagy was willing to take on the challenge of writing a postlude concerning the missiological challenges that the theme raises. We – Erika van Nes-Visscher and Bernhard Reitsma – have done the same from a theological perspective. These missiological and theological insights highlight issues that need further research and could be addressed at a future meeting.

We are very grateful for the inspiring scholars in the research network, and we want to thank all those who contributed to this volume for their committed contributions and their effort to provide their papers on time, or almost on time, in the middle of all kinds of personally and professionally challenging circumstances. The contributions have been blind double peer-reviewed.

Dr. Wilbert van Saane provided us with a first editorial review of all the articles and we are very grateful for his work. We would like to thank

1 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Protestant Theological University, the Evangelical Theological Faculty Leuven, Tilburg University, and Radboud University Nijmegen.

2 Textual studies, hermeneutics, philosophy of religion, social studies, practical theology, interreligious studies, anthropology, postcolonial theology, missiology.



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# 1 Exclusion versus Inclusion: Searching for Religious Inspiration

*Bernhard Reitsma*

## Abstract

This introduction to the volume explores the research question of whether it is possible to be religiously exclusive and at the same time socially inclusive. It analyses the different meanings of exclusivism and inclusivism in different contexts and outlines the problem of how religious exclusivism can and does sometimes collide with social inclusion, especially in the context of absolute truth claims of monotheistic religions. The heart of the research is the reading of exclusive texts, starting with the issue of the death penalty for apostasy. This is the most exclusive form of religious and social exclusion, which is required by all Abrahamic religions. How do religious traditions interpret such exclusive texts, and do they necessarily exclude social inclusion?

**Keywords:** apostasy, exclusivism, inclusivism, exclusion, inclusion, monotheism

## Introduction

‘I killed God and buried Him.’ That is what Jason Walters said after he was deradicalized. Walters is an ex-Jihadist who was part of the so called ‘Hofstadgroep’, a radical Muslim terrorist group in the Netherlands. Raised in a Christian family, he converted to Islam when he was twelve years old and quite rapidly radicalized at the age of nineteen through contact with the Hofstadgroep. He was – in his own words – a Jihadi seeking to become a martyr. In the process of his arrest in 2004, he wounded five police officers with a hand grenade. He spent nine years in prison and during that time, through a process of study and reflection, he became deradicalized. When asked how that was possible, he answered, because ‘I killed God and buried

Him'. According to Walters, the only way to part with extremism was to abandon his faith in one God. For him, believing in one God and being a faithful inclusive citizen of a democratic society simply did not go together. Monotheism always leads to exclusion and violence.<sup>1</sup>

That sounds like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's problem of the damned neighbour. In his *The Social Contract* he writes, 'It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned; to love them would be to hate God who punishes them: we positively must either reclaim or torment them.'<sup>2</sup>

This is in a nutshell the tension between religious exclusivism and social inclusivism, which will occupy us here. If one considers one's own religion as true and its content and form the unique expression of divine revelation, it automatically seems to imply that we cannot create space for the religious other in society. 'Theological intolerance', as Rousseau calls it, seems incompatible with social inclusiveness. Leaving or, even more, creating space for the right to belong to and practise any other religion would then imply compromising the truth of one's own conviction, either by denying divine judgement or by adopting a more or less pluralistic view on (religious) life and morality. In other words, do we have to compromise social inclusiveness for the sake of religious purity, or do we compromise religious truth for the sake of an inclusive society? In a time of polarization and radicalization, Rousseau's conviction is apparently still timely and needs to be addressed. That is what we intend in this volume.

## Research Question

Our main question is if and how it is possible to be religiously exclusive and at the same time socially inclusive. Is there some way that we can differ in our religious views of the common good in society while we still live and work together in good harmony for the well-being of that society? Or is that impossible or even unwanted? What if one considers the other's worldview not simply as erroneous but as truly dangerous to society or even as evil? Are there ways to mediate between Rousseau's opposites?

1 Interview with Jason Walters in 'De ongelofelijke podcast', *Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) Radio 1/EO*, episode 10, podcast audio, 9 August 2019, accessed 6 December 2021, <https://podcast.npo.nl/feed/de-ongelofelijke-podcast.xml>, and in 'Argos', *NPO/Radio 1*, September 29, 2018, 14.00–15.00, accessed 6 December 2021, <https://www.nporadio1.nl/uitzendingen/argos/d1201460-1796-459b-b332-e6373e5027b1/2018-09-29-argos>.

2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Penguin Great Ideas (Harlow: Penguin Books, 2004), ch. 8, pt. 4.

## The Contribution of this Book

The question of exclusiveness and inclusiveness has been discussed extensively in different kinds of literature in many ways.<sup>3</sup> This book's contribution is unique for several reasons. Firstly, inquiring into the relationship between, on the one hand, exclusive beliefs and, on the other hand, the (post)modern pursuit of an all-inclusive society is a more or less unique element. Secondly, we present here a much needed and asked for multidisciplinary approach with participants primarily from the Christian tradition, but also from Islam and Judaism. It is meant as a contribution to Christian theology, but with the strong belief that Christian theology cannot be done in isolation and needs to interact with other beliefs and worldviews, especially monotheistic traditions. Thirdly, it is not intended as a one-dimensional multireligious perspective in which the particularities and unique perspectives of the three monotheistic religions are watered down or blended into one monotheistic view. The discussion starts from distinct worldviews and textual traditions<sup>4</sup> with, however, the ultimate intention of finding a way of living together with these sometimes-opposing differences. Finally, the unique contribution of this book is that it is a hermeneutical enterprise aiming to understand difficult exclusive texts and contexts in relation to each other concerning the boundaries of the religious community and its beliefs.

## Terminology

Before we can try to answer the question of how exclusive faith relates to an inclusive society/inclusive living, we should first clarify our terminology. Exclusion, exclusivism, and exclusivity and inclusion, inclusivism, or inclusivity have different meanings in different contexts. There are at least three areas.

1. Religious exclusivism and inclusivism, concerning (eternal) salvation.

3 Within Christian Theology mainly in missiological literature, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989). See also Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) and Miroslav Volf, *Allah. A Christians Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

4 For simplicity we use the concept 'world-view', without pretending that we are dealing with clear-cut fixed models or systems. It is about a perspective on reality, a framework with which we look at the present. A good alternative concept is 'social imaginaries', see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

2. Epistemological exclusivism and inclusivism, concerning truth (regarding religion).
3. Relational exclusivism and inclusivism, concerning living together in society/social relations.

### 1. Religious Terminology, Concerning (Eternal) Salvation

The classical way of describing the different *Christian*<sup>5</sup> approaches to other religions is the distinction of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>6</sup> Paul Hedges emphasizes that these categories are not meant as a fixed type of approach; they are much more fluid, sometimes overlap, and can each cover a range of ideas.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is better to speak of exclusivisms, inclusivisms, and pluralisms. There are many varieties of each category and people can find themselves in more than one. Nevertheless, the framework helps to clarify some of the issues that are at stake here. It is also important to realize that the main issue addressed in Christian exclusivism is that of salvation. How are people being saved, eternally, and how do we know? Here we simply give a brief summary and overview of the meaning of these different approaches, not an extensive discussion on the differences.<sup>8</sup>

In this context exclusivism refers in essence to the conviction that Jesus Christ is the unique revelation of God and salvation is only through personal faith in Him, as mediated by the Bible as the only true revelation of God. People who do not know Christ personally are lost.<sup>9</sup> Inclusivism agrees to a certain extent with the fact that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as the saviour of the world, but people from other faiths might or can be saved, for instance by obeying the natural law of God, because somehow God has revealed himself directly to people or because people who believe in a God or are religious can be considered anonymous Christians since Christ died

5 Developed as a perspective in Christian theology/missiology, it can also be adapted as model for other worldviews/religions.

6 The terminology was introduced by Alan Race in 1983 in *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1993); see Paul Hedges, 'A Reflection on Typologies: Negotiating a Fast-Moving Discussion', in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges (London: SCM Press, 2008), 17–33 (p. 17).

7 Hedges, 'Typologies', 27.

8 That is the reason we primarily use Race and Hedges, *Christian Approaches* here as the basic textbook, as it offers a useful summary of the different approaches, even though there are many other publications that could be referenced.

9 Hedges, 'Typologies', 17, 18. Daniel Strange, 'Exclusivisms: "Indeed Their Rock is Not like Our Rock"', in *Christian Approaches*, ed. Race and Hedges, 36–62 (pp. 36–37).

for the whole world.<sup>10</sup> Inclusivism, according to David Cheetham, tries to make sense of both ‘Christ as the unique and normative revelation of God’ and ‘God’s universal salvific will’.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, pluralism suggests that many or any believer from most or all religions will be saved if they are strongly committed to their own traditions.<sup>12</sup> Theologically most religions are on equal footing with Christianity and ‘testify to the same ultimate transcendent reality’, albeit in different forms and beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

This framework has been critiqued by many.<sup>14</sup> According to some, there are more than three options. Others argue that there are fewer options. Yet others find that religions are forced into a Christian framework or think that the terms are polemical, while others think that the focus should be on religious rituals and actions.<sup>15</sup> Hedges acknowledges the limitations of the classification but emphasizes its usefulness in a *theologia religionum*. Two things should be kept in mind. First of all, the framework is *descriptive*, describing what different Christian positions themselves state about the religious other.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, most theologies of religion themselves have focused upon the notion of salvation, trying to understand who is ‘inside’ and who is ‘outside’ of the religious community.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, this model cannot describe all possible ways of viewing the religious other in all aspects, as Dirk-Martin Grube will also show (see Chapter 2). As long as we do not stretch the model and acknowledge it simplifies reality in many ways, it can be helpful in ordering different Christian perspectives on the religious other. It is still ‘the most widely known and used approach’.<sup>18</sup>

There is a fourth category, called ‘particularities’, although some claim that it is simply an extrapolation of the previous three categories. It is a

10 Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 18.

11 David Cheetham, ‘Inclusivisms: Honouring Faithfulness and Openness’, in *Christian Approaches*, ed. Race and Hedges, 63–84 (p. 63).

12 Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 18.

13 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ‘Pluralisms: How to Appreciate Religious Diversity Theologically’, in *Christian Approaches*, ed. Race and Hedges, 85–110 (p. 88).

14 See Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 18–22.

15 For eight different criticisms in detail, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ‘Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology – Clarified and Reaffirmed’, in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaceted Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 13–27.

16 Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 20.

17 Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 20.

18 See Hedges, ‘Typologies’, 30. Kärkkäinen uses different terminology for more or less the same categories, namely ‘ecclesiocentrism’, ‘christocentrism’, and ‘theocentrism or realitycentrism’. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 23–26.

more postmodern interpretation that emphasizes the 'distinct or particular nature' of every religion and rejects the existence or significance of so-called cross-cultural categories, like religion, religious experience, or salvation.<sup>19</sup> It is not possible to understand different religions in terms of one religion only. Every religion needs to be interpreted from its own context and in its own right. This approach combines aspects of all other categories but 'rejects pluralism' that speaks of universals and dismisses inclusivism, because inclusivism assumes that every religion is the same in essence. At the same time, it cannot be seen as exclusivism, for according to the category of 'particularities', God is universal. It combines several elements, claiming that each faith is unique, it is only possible to speak from a specific tradition, and that the Holy Spirit may be at work in other faiths. Although there is no salvation in other faiths, they are still somehow involved in God's plans for humanity. 'Particularities' is based in a postmodern and postliberal worldview; the orthodox doctrines of trinity and Christ are foundational for a particularist's theology of religions.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Epistemological Terminology, Concerning Truth

Obviously, all these different perspectives are exclusive in the sense that they exclude the other perspectives. Pluralism is as exclusive as exclusivism. Believing that all people of every religion will be saved through their own faith conflicts with the belief that salvation is only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Those are mutually exclusive truth claims. Here exclusivism refers to the 'epistemological fact that each proposition, if true, excludes the truth of its logical opposite'.<sup>21</sup>

Either Muḥammad is God's messenger and the Qur'ān God's divine revelation, or they are not. Either Christ is the divine Son of God, or he is not.

In the same way, all views are in some sense inclusivistic, indicating that theologians of one religion assess other religions 'in terms and concepts of their own religion'.<sup>22</sup> Others are included into the framework of one's own, for example Christian, worldview. Apart from the question of whether that is possible at all, it is a form of hermeneutical inclusivism.

19 Hedges, 'Typologies', 29; Hedges, 'Particularities: Tradition-Specific Post-Modern Perspectives', in *Christian Approaches*, ed. Race and Hedges, 112–35 (p. 112).

20 Hedges, 'Particularities', 112–13. With this category Hedges refers to many different views from quite a variety of different voices, from Gavin D'Costa to Lesslie Newbigin and Alister McGrath.

21 Schmidt-Leukel, 'Pluralisms', 87.

22 Schmidt Leukel, 'Pluralisms', 87.

The notions ‘exclusion’ and ‘inclusion’ can therefore be used to refer to issues of truth and falsehood in religion. Even though this has impact on and is related to questions of salvation, the different perspectives are not identical. In his contribution, Grube (Chapter 2) will delve deeper into the different ways exclusivism and inclusivism are used in relation to both salvation and truth and into the possibilities and obstacles of using and applying these terms.

### **3. Relational Terminology, Concerning Social Relations and Mechanisms**

Thirdly, exclusivism and inclusivism also relate to different processes in society in which people are either included in or excluded from certain groups and societies. Exclusivism is the attitude and action in which certain people are not allowed to participate in a group or society as a whole or consequently do not have equal rights with others, for instance with those in power. Inclusivism indicates the pursuit of a society in which people are welcome as they are and in which there is space for everyone, regardless of religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, colour, or ability. Here our focus is on social relations, not on religious or ethical truth categories.

Social inclusivism does not, however, exist without a form of exclusivism. Inclusion is impossible without exclusion, for without exclusion there is no need to speak about inclusion, since all are simply part of the group. Sometimes exclusion is even desired in order to preserve an inclusive society, for instance when it comes to destructive evil. In the Netherlands, for instance, exclusion from government funding is required whenever organizations discriminate against their workers on the basis of religion or gender. Such organizations could even be prosecuted in court. In the same way, a corrupt lawyer will be banned from the bar, a teacher with improper relationships with minors in their class will be expelled, and a football player who perpetrates a serious foul is dealt a red card. Inclusion needs exclusion and vice versa.

The main question of whether exclusive belief and inclusive living go together is therefore not simply about promoting either exclusiveness or inclusiveness, but it concerns exploring what kind of exclusivity and inclusivity we wish for. Total inclusivity is not possible or desired at any of the three interpretative levels of exclusivism/inclusivism mentioned above (salvation, truth, and social relations), and the same is true for total exclusion.

In this book all three areas somehow interlock. When we ask if it is possible to be religiously exclusive and socially inclusive, we express the idea that a certain ‘worldview’ or ‘religion’ always implies a certain (exclusive)



position on how to interpret reality, the meaning of life, and the problem(s) in the world (truth). That in turn also impacts possible solutions to these problems (salvation). It does not matter whether these solutions focus on the ordering of society and the salvation of this world, or on the eternal salvation of people and creation. Opposing worldviews in this respect are related to truth claims, which in turn impact the approach to people with different worldviews and to the question of whether others can be included in the way we address life issues. If one group, for instance, really believes that the salvation of our earth depends on radical interventions because of climate change, it will be difficult to accept the group that rejects the problem altogether. Since it is a matter of life and death, the approach that does not lead to survival but to perceived destruction will not be tolerated. This has been at issue concerning the recent approach to the spread of Covid-19 and the issues of ignoring or infringing certain rights. The same mechanism applies to eternal salvation: truth must be preached or implemented. And, to name another aspect, if the honour of God is at stake, for instance in implementing certain divinely ordered laws, compromise becomes problematic and may even be perceived as a case of apostasy.<sup>23</sup>

### **Monotheistic Dilemma?**

All worldviews or social imaginaries are to a certain extent exclusive in the first and second sense of the meaning. As a perceived expression of truth based on a certain worldview or interpretation of good and bad – either in relation to the present time or eternity – they exclude other options. Still, it is sometimes argued that monotheistic religions are particularly problematic. As Selina O’Grady says,

Traditionalists believe that their religion contains the essential truths and is the answer to all the world’s evils. Their role is to restore it to its purest form by faithfully following a literalist reading of scripture, and in the case of Muslims by imposing sharia and returning the world to the way it was under Muḥammad in the seventh century. Believing that they possess the sole truth, fundamentalists/traditionalists tend to be intolerant of those with different opinions and interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

23 Cf. the research of Dijkhuizen and Barentsen, Chapter 16 of this volume.

24 Selina O’Grady, *In the Name of God: The Role of Religion in the Modern World: A History of Judeo-Christian and Islamic Tolerance* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020), 405.

For O'Grady, traditionalists are not just (violent) extremists but committed orthodox believers. It could of course be true of all fundamentalisms, religious or not, but O'Grady is specifically thinking of monotheistic traditionalism. Since there is only one God and his revelation contains the truth, it is difficult to leave room for other convictions. In an interview in a Dutch newspaper, she said, 'Monotheistic religions have intolerance built into the system. By definition this one God is a jealous God, whether He is called Jahweh, Allah or Father. There is no room for competitors, tolerance is impossible.'<sup>25</sup> It is not easy to negotiate over the truth with the Creator of the universe, you simply do not compromise with God. Paul Cliteur has called this the Monotheistic Dilemma.<sup>26</sup> He tries to show that religious terrorism flows from a certain monotheistic logic. The monotheistic dilemma is the question of whether believers should obey the laws of their country or should stick to the laws of the religious community that have been dictated by a supranational God.<sup>27</sup> According to Cliteur, these can never go together. That is in a different way the same opposition Rousseau describes when he talks about the damned neighbour.

Apart from the question as to whether these descriptions are fair presentations of the essence of monotheism, in the context of exclusiveness and inclusiveness, the suspicion that monotheism is geared towards violent exclusivism is deeply problematic (and outdated in light of more recent discussion). There are several reasons for that. First of all, the tendency to violent exclusiveness is not restricted to monotheism but applies to every worldview, as Karen Armstrong has made clear.<sup>28</sup> It is not too difficult to find examples of very violent intolerant polytheism, as in the Roman Empire with its many gods and deities. Those who rejected the Hellenistic Pantheon, like Jews and Christians, often faced intolerant persecution. Secondly, the supposed tension between the divine and the mundane order of things is not expressed only in violent ways. Many Salafi Muslims, for instance, who are in general considered quite 'traditional' or 'fundamentalistic', reject political and military involvement in any way.<sup>29</sup> The same can be said for the Christian Amish communities. And what might be said of monasteries and cloisters

25 Herman Veenhof, 'Vervolgden werden vervolgers. Monotheïstische religies hebben volgens auteur O'Grady een ingebouwde onverdraagzaamheid', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 6 February 2021, 17.

26 Paul Cliteur, *Het monotheïstisch dilemma* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 2020).

27 Cliteur, *Dilemma*, 17.

28 Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015).

29 See Joas Wagemakers, 'Salafism', *Oxford Research Encyclopedias. Religion*, published online 2016, accessed 17 November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.255>.

throughout history, where Christians (and Muslims) have withdrawn from ordinary life to be non-violently devoted to the Divine world?

We can conclude that there is indeed a tension. Yet it is seriously misconstrued by Cliteur and others as being characteristic for monotheism. It is a much larger problem of which monotheism is only a subspecies. It is the dilemma between an exclusive worldview, on the one hand, and the pursuit of an inclusive society, on the other. How do we tolerate those who oppose our view(s), or what we absolutely believe to be good and healthy for our world? How can we accept and live in peace with someone who according to my (religious) worldview is a threat to the flourishing or even survival of society?

### **Monotheistically Transcending the Monotheistic Dilemma?**

In this context Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes a position exactly opposite to the idea of the monotheistic dilemma. He is convinced that monotheism is the only real solution to the problem of antagonism, exclusivism, and even (religious) violence. ‘Nothing could be more alien to the spirit of Abrahamic monotheism than what is happening today in the name of jihad.’<sup>30</sup> For Sacks, monotheism is the way to transcend the persistent dualism between good and evil, between us and them, that has always been present in the world. Such dualism is typically human rather than religious<sup>31</sup> and a cheap way out of the complexity of life.<sup>32</sup> The human dilemma is that we are all very different and at the same connected in tribes and groups. Those tribes clash. The simplest way out of that complexity is dualism, a simple division between good (us) and evil (the others). If we want to overcome that dualism, we need something that transcends this dualism. According to monotheism, it is the transcendent God who is able to do that and transcend our particularity. As creator, God is universal.<sup>33</sup> God is not just our God, but the ‘God of all’.<sup>34</sup> Monotheism forces us to learn to handle complexity.

This last approach is interesting and promising for our task here, but Sacks is quite selective in his approach to religion. He mainly focuses on different stories in the book of Genesis, such as the story of Ismail and Isaac,

30 Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 203.

31 Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 101.

32 Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 53.

33 Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 194–95.

34 Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 205.

Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, and concludes that ‘God may choose, but *God does not reject*’ (italics in the original).<sup>35</sup> God’s choice for the one does not imply the rejection of the other. God seems to have favourites, but Sacks shows from a rereading of these stories that this is not true. These stories are, according to Sacks, constructed to say exactly the opposite. By their rhetoric power, we become sympathetic to the ones who are left out, and we find God on our side precisely in God’s care for the lost and rejected.<sup>36</sup>

By focusing one-sidedly only on these texts, however, Sacks ignores other parts of the Tanakh, where we read quite different stories that precisely seem to promote dualism and antagonism. It is not easy to make the same point from these passages as Sacks does from the Genesis stories. In different places it seems that the Bible takes the side of the oppressors or condones and orders violent aggression and even what we today would call genocide.<sup>37</sup> And even in the parts Sacks does discuss in Genesis, he draws quick conclusions and does not make clear how inclusion would apply to those within and outside of Israel who continue to resist the Holy One of Israel.

All of this shows the need for a careful reading of texts. One of these texts, which we will discuss in this volume, is Deut. 17:2–7, where God seems to order the stoning of idolators, who are in fact apostates. In Chapter 5 Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk present a careful reading of this passage.

## Apostasy

For the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, apostasy is a difficult reality. In all three religions it is considered an (almost) unforgivable act should believers decide to leave their faith and their faith community. It is liable to capital punishment.<sup>38</sup> It is thus in danger of becoming an extremist form of exclusivism. We have chosen to make the question of apostasy the starting point for our research. There are several reasons for this choice.

1. Apostasy is an ultimate test case for the tension between inclusion and exclusion. Apostasy in itself is a form of exclusion (on the level of social relations): the apostate excludes themselves from the

35 Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 124.

36 Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 103 and chs. 6–9.

37 See Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

38 Deut. 13; 17:2–7. For Islamic sources, see Chapter 12 of this volume: Razi H. Quadir, ‘Apostasy in Islam: A Review of Sources and Positions’.

community and does not want to be part of it and excludes the community from their life and convictions. It always raises the question of how relationships do or do not continue. It is of course also related to the question of truth: the apostate rejects (part of) the truth the community holds and the apostate's new truth is rejected by the community. According to the community, that must have consequences in terms of salvation.

2. The death penalty that is required by different passages in the Tanakh and in Islamic texts is the most exclusive form of social and religious exclusion (on the level of salvation and social relations). It eliminates the person from the community and even from life itself. This leads to crucial questions about God, God's (relation with) people, and living together in society. If this were the response God required, then that only intensifies Rousseau's problem of the damned neighbour. And it seems to strengthen the idea of a monotheistic dilemma or the conviction that monotheistic religions cannot accommodate inclusion. Looking at this form of exclusion might help us answer the question of whether that is true and whether it is a problem. Is inclusion the ultimate goal? What kind of inclusion are we talking about and what are the limits to inclusion?
3. The case of punishment and apostasy is clearly present in the history of the Christian Church. In different phases, the church has responded differently to people who left the Christian faith and the Christian community, varying from banning them from the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, to handing them over to the legal authorities for (capital) punishment. An important question in the first centuries concerned whether the so called lapsi – those who had fallen away from Christ under severe pressure and persecution – should be accepted again into the community after repentance.<sup>39</sup> But – to be clear – falling away under severe pressure is different from cases like that of Salman Rushdie.
4. Apostasy is an important issue in the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Apostasy in traditional Islamic thinking is very problematic. Even though today there are different interpretations among Muslim scholars, the death penalty is still considered by many as the true response to apostasy in an Islamic state. Many (Sunni) law schools require the death penalty.<sup>40</sup> That is particularly important due to the

39 See B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*, WUNT ser. 2, 115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), ch. 1.1, 1–33.

40 For an overview of Islamic approaches to apostasy, see Quadir, Chapter 12 of this volume.

situation of many Muslims who leave their religion or want to follow Jesus. Their situation in the world is extremely difficult,<sup>41</sup> although there are several exceptions. It is, however, unfair for Christians to discuss these issues with Muslims without looking at similar ideas in the texts within their own tradition. There also seems to be an internal Christian inconsistency/divergence, as these exclusive passages do not seem to align with the commandment to love one's neighbour and with the instruction in the sermon on the mount to love even one's enemy and to pray for those who persecute the believers (Matt. 5:44, cf. Rom. 12:14).

5. In the history of Christianity, we come across different stories of exclusion. After the Reconquista of the Islamic parts of Spain undertaken by the Christian community, Muslims (and Jews) were faced with the choice between conversion (baptism), leaving Spain, or the death penalty.<sup>42</sup> When comparing Islamic and Christian responses to apostasy, it is important to be aware of differences in religious and social contexts. Interpretations of the relations between religion and state, religion and ethnicity, and individuals and the community are important for the way people understand and apply their tradition.

## Textual Traditions in Context

We have chosen to approach the issue of exclusion and inclusion through three different types of (re)sources: 1) social and philosophical; 2) textual; and 3) practice-related. At first, textual approaches seem fundamental, since holy books form the roots of monotheistic religious traditions and hold the divine principles of (eternal) life. Therefore, they could be seen as decisive in the ordering of the religious life, of the framework of exclusion and inclusion. That is why the examination of textual traditions are a major element within this volume, particularly in Part 2, with an exclusive text on apostasy to start with (Deut. 17:2–7) followed by other Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts.

41 Ziya Meral, *No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam and Failures of International Community* (London: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008). Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam. Apostates Speak Out* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

42 See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 318–19; Maurits S. Berger, *A Brief History of Islam in Europe: Thirteen Centuries of Creed, Conflict and Coexistence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014), 76, 126–27.

However, texts are just one source that influence our understanding of our world. There are other dynamics that are important. Cultural, historical, and social contexts influence the way people deal with exclusion and inclusion, and that in turn also influences the reading of texts. In more community-oriented cultures that centre on honour and shame, apostasy seems to be more problematic than in some more individualistically oriented societies that focus on guilt and forgiveness.<sup>43</sup> In democratically governed communities, the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are different from societies with tribal power structures and hierarchies, where, for instance, the position of minorities is much more vulnerable than in democratic societies. There is little room to deviate from the group values and perspectives. Because of all this, social and philosophical 'sources' are also looked at even before we address exclusive textual traditions on exclusion and inclusion. In this way, we explore the logical and sociological frameworks with which we read texts.

Finally, traditions are also received and applied in different contexts, and therefore our third (re)source is practice-related approaches. They illustrate and instruct us on how certain mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion today are related to religious traditions and how deviant interpretations are sometimes considered as cases of apostasy.

We have chosen to look at exclusive texts and mechanisms. This is a deliberate choice, although not an easy one. Those texts are often avoided out of fear of encouraging intolerance and conflict. However, these texts represent exclusive religious beliefs and can be important obstacles for living together in peace. They highlight irresolvable differences between one religious group and others and assume an 'us versus them' approach. If that is the (divine) norm, it will be very hard even to consider inclusive societies. So, if we want to see how exclusion relates to inclusion and if both could go together, it is more rewarding to start with exclusive worldviews and address exclusive texts and mechanisms. Obviously, inclusive traditions that emphasize the unity of mankind and the universality of salvation seem better equipped to further positive relationships between different religious communities. However, the problem lies with the exclusive texts and traditions. If we fail to address them properly, they will continue to provide an obstacle to a thorough view on exclusivity and inclusivity. This is why we have decided to address them.

43 See Robert Ermers, *Honor Related Violence: A New Social Psychological Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2018) and *Eer en Eerwraak: Definitie en Analyse* (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2007).

## Overview of the Book

Our research operates in concentric circles, starting with the theme of apostasy in certain exclusive texts, widening it to other issues of exclusion and inclusion to then end with a number of practice-related examples. In Part 1, we have chosen to start with the social and philosophical approaches. The reason is that we never approach texts in a vacuum, and it is helpful to be aware of mechanisms and understandings that influence both our interaction with texts and traditions and our practices. In the context of reconstructing religious exclusivism in humble ways, Dirk-Martin Grube discusses the value and interpretation of the terminology of exclusion and inclusion (Chapter 2), Robert Ermers looks at social psychological aspects of responses to apostasy and exclusion (Chapter 3), while Jack Barentsen presents a social identity theory perspective (Chapter 4).

With that we move to the second part, which presents several studies on textual (re)sources, from Biblical texts as well as from Jewish and Islamic traditions. The reading starts with an exposition of Deut. 17:2–7, which explicitly presents the death penalty for (inciting) apostasy as a divine command. Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk try to understand the meaning of this passage in its context and reception history (Chapter 5). Henk Bakker then looks at how the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus's view on apostasy, otherness, and exile (Chapter 6), while Peter-Ben Smit subsequently studies exclusion and inclusion in Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, in relation to 'the body' (Chapter 7). Kobus Kok continues with a similar study of 1 Peter (Chapter 8) and takes into consideration the social identity complexity theory perspective as heuristic tool. Finally, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte looks at the explicit reference to the Deuteronomic texts on apostasy in Heb. 10:28 (Chapter 9), where the author stresses that the punishment for dishonouring the Son of God will be even worse than that set out in Deuteronomy 17 concerning idolatry.

After Christian contributions, Jewish and Islamic perspectives follow. Leo Mock describes the Rabbinic interpretations of apostasy and exclusive texts and how they have been used in tradition (Chapter 10). Yaser Ellethy describes the theological foundations of an Islamic view on the religious other (Chapter 11) and Razi Quadir presents an overview of Islamic traditions on apostasy and their impact on Muslim–Christian relations (Chapter 12). Gé Speelman concludes this section by exploring the open letter 'A Common Word', which was addressed to the Christian community by a large number of Muslims scholars from a wide diversity of 'denominations' and movements. She explores the consequences this invitation to dialogue on peaceful coexistence has for dealing with exclusion and inclusion (Chapter 13).



The third part consists of three case studies that in one way or another are dealing with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in different contexts. Eleonora Hof presents an insight into the use of Old Testament texts in both the colonial and postcolonial discourse concerning the colonization of North America (Chapter 14). Simon Ririhena helps us with insights from the Moluccas that could possibly be a starting point for finding a way of connecting exclusivism with inclusivism today outside of the Moluccan context (Chapter 15). Finally, Laura Dijkhuizen and Jack Barentsen show how in two Evangelical Churches, the issue of women in leadership has led to mutual mechanisms of exclusion and even mutual accusations of apostasy (Chapter 16).

In the concluding part, the contributions from Dorottya Nagy (Chapter 17) and Erika Van Nes and Bernhard Reitsma (Chapter 18) try to formulate what, respectively, the missiological and theological challenges are that arise from the research and the three (re)sources/approaches. These challenges are intended for further research into the more normative aspects of exclusion and inclusion. What do the results of this volume contribute to understanding how we should live together today, with different exclusive beliefs and worldviews, if we want to prevent chaotic and violent societies? Or is that impossible? And are these contributions helpful in a diversity of contexts?

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44 For more information on the Foundation, see 'About us', The Church in the Context of Islam, accessed 22 September 2022, [www.kerk-islam.nl/en](http://www.kerk-islam.nl/en).

## 2 A Humble Exclusivism? Reconstructing Exclusivism under Justificationist Rather than Bivalent Parameters

*Dirk-Martin Grube*

### **Abstract**

This contribution develops a humble exclusivism that respects religious Others in their Otherness. It focuses on truth-gearred rather than salvation-gearred religious exclusivism. It argues that there is nothing wrong with exclusivism but that it can become wrong when held in situations of cognitive ambiguity. In those situations, it needs to be reconstructed in humble rather than triumphalistic ways. Religious exclusivism should be maintained in a humble spirit since religion is characterized by cognitive ambiguity. A justificationist rather than a bivalent theoretical framework allows for cognitive humbleness. Reconstructed under justificationist parameters, religious exclusivism allows one to claim cognitive superiority for one's own religion – but in a 'broken' way. Broken superiority and a humble exclusivism fit best with Christianity's emphasis upon 'fallenness'.

**Keywords:** Humble exclusivism, bivalence, justification, ambiguity, broken superiority

### **Introduction**

The guiding question of this volume is to what extent a religious exclusivism can go together with social inclusivity. I will tackle this question by focusing on the concept of exclusivism. I will develop a concept which is amenable

to being socially inclusive, a *humble exclusivism*.<sup>1</sup> In this context ‘humble’ is to be understood as making truth claims in an epistemically modest (that is, reflective and self-critical) fashion. This humbleness is opposed to what I have dubbed ‘Dawkinsianism’,<sup>2</sup> the attitude that one’s own group possesses the absolute truth and thus has the right to occupy the (epistemic) ‘high ground’.

My point is not to suggest that a humble exclusivism is the only kind of exclusivism that is amenable to social inclusivity. Depending on how the latter is defined, it can go together with non-humble concepts of exclusivism. For example, a non-humble Christian exclusivist can work together with a non-humble Muslim exclusivist on, say, opposing abortion. Yet working together on particular (political) issues is not the kind of social inclusivity I am interested in in this article. Rather, I search for a more thoroughgoing and sustainable form of being together as religious human beings. I am curious whether it is possible to be a religious exclusivist and at the same time to respect the religious Other in their Otherness, namely to consider them to be a potential peer rather than to look down upon them. Thus, I investigate whether exclusivists can avoid being ‘Dawkinsianists’ by not postulating a (cognitive) hierarchy in which the religious Other is situated ‘down there’ and one’s own religion is on the ‘high ground’.

Exclusivism is often taken to imply such an undesirable hierarchy. At least, in much of the literature, it is associated with a-social, morally or epistemically vicious characteristics or traits. To name just a few: elitism,<sup>3</sup> insensitivity,<sup>4</sup> irrationality, egoism, self-serving arbitrariness or dishonesty, oppression, intellectual arrogance, imperialism, unreasonableness, and

1 The term ‘humble’ refers to the discussion on humility in epistemology. See, e.g. the contributions in the volume *Intellectual Virtue-Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael de Paul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), such as that by Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, ‘Humility and Epistemic Goods’, 257–80. See also Ian James Kidd, ‘Inevitability, Contingency, and Epistemic Humility’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part A*, 55 (February 2016): 12–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2015.08.006>.

2 After Richard Dawkins’s attempts to claim unearned (cognitive) privileges for the worldview he supports, naturalism (see Dirk-Martin Grube, ‘Concluding Remarks – Reply to the Respondents to “Justified Religious Difference: A Constructive Approach to Religious Diversity”’, in *Philosophical Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Dirk-Martin Grube and Walter Van Herck (London: Routledge, 2018), 86–114 [pp. 96–98]).

3 See Joseph Runzo, ‘God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism’, *Faith and Philosophy* 5, no. 4 (October 1988): 343–64 (p. 347 and others).

4 Wilfred C. Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 14.

unjustifiability.<sup>5</sup> Some kinds of religious exclusivism are even associated with fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup>

The argument I wish to make in this contribution is not that those charges are misplaced. Given a classical notion of exclusivism, they – or, at least, some of them – may be applicable. Yet I wish to investigate whether exclusivism can be *reconstructed* in such a way as to avoid undesirable consequences of this sort. My guiding question is thus whether a position is conceivable which is recognizably exclusivist but avoids these consequences and is thus capable of treating the religious Other as a potential peer.

### The Definition of (Religious) Exclusivism and the Different Kinds of Exclusivism

The first thing to note is that I distinguish between ‘religious exclusivism’ and ‘(general) exclusivism’. Religious exclusivism is a subspecies of general exclusivism (or, simply, ‘exclusivism’). It refers to making exclusivist claims in the realm of religion. Yet before we describe this subspecies more closely, we should gain more clarity on what we mean by exclusivism. What are the essential characteristics of exclusivism?

As the term suggests, ‘exclusivism’ implies that something or somebody is excluded. If nothing or nobody were excluded, talk of exclusivism would be pointless. Yet the logic of exclusion implies inclusion as well. That is, some positions must be excluded from exclusion. If nothing were excluded from exclusion and thus everything were excluded, talk of ‘exclusion’ would lose its point. ‘Exclusivism’ must thus imply some kind of dialectic between exclusion and inclusion.

*Religious* exclusivism thus must imply a dialectic between exclusion and inclusion in the religious realm. It must exclude some positions or people and include others. It is commonly distinguished from inclusivism and pluralism. The tripartite scheme of exclusivism,<sup>7</sup> inclusivism, and

5 See the list of charges Alvin Plantinga collects in ‘Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism’, in *Reading Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and Michael Scott (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 294–304 (pp. 295–96) (repr. of *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor [Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1995], 191–215). Plantinga rejects all those objections.

6 See Douglas Pratt, ‘Exclusivism and Exclusivity: A Contemporary Theological Challenge’, *Pacifica* 20, no. 3 (2007): 291–306, (p. 293), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1030570X0702000304>.

7 In the (inter)religious discourse, it is common to use ‘exclusivism’ only. However, I use ‘religious exclusivism’ in order to distinguish it from (general) exclusivism.

pluralism is a standard, though not uncontested, way to distinguish between the different stances towards religions that differ from one's own religion.

But what are the exclusivist religious claims about? In the religious discourse, 'exclusivism' can be used in different ways (see Chapter 1 of this volume). For our purposes, we need to distinguish between an exclusivism regarding salvation and an exclusivism regarding truth. The difference between a salvation-gearred and a truth-gearred exclusivism can be made clear with the help of an example taken from Christianity: holding the belief that Jesus is the Christ is the only true description of reality is a form of truth-gearred exclusivism, while holding the belief that Jesus is the Christ is the only way to salvation is a form of salvation-gearred exclusivism.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, both forms of exclusivism are conceptually related to each other. For example, it would be odd to suggest that the belief that Jesus is the Christ is exclusively true but that it is a different belief that saves. If you were to hold such a view, you would drive a (extremely counterintuitive) wedge between truth and salvation. You would also end up having serious theological problems: why did God reveal Jesus as the Christ when this revelation sets us on the wrong foot regarding our salvation?

Although both forms of exclusivism are conceptually related to each other, they still need to be distinguished. The reason is that their extensions are not the same. A simple example makes that clear: imagine a belief system, B, according to which not only B but also alternative belief systems can lead to salvation. A believer in B can thus consistently hold that B is exclusively true but that believers of other belief systems can be saved as well. This believer is thus an exclusivist regarding truth but a non-exclusivist regarding salvation. Both notions of exclusivism thus need to be distinguished.

This example also shows that a commitment to an exclusivism regarding truth does not commit one to an exclusivism regarding salvation. The following considerations refer solely to truth-gearred forms of religious exclusivism and do not pre-determine questions of salvation.

Thus far, we have unearthed that religious exclusivism must imply a dialectic between exclusion and inclusion in the realm of religion and have decided that this dialectic must have something to do with truth (rather than salvation). Are there, then, definitions of religious exclusivism available which define it in truth-related, thus *alethic*, ways? A whole class of definitions exists that describes (religious) exclusivism in purely alethic

8 For a more comprehensive treatment of both forms of exclusivism, see Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14–34 (on truth) and 52–71 (on salvation).

ways. An example of this class is Alvin Plantinga's characterization that the exclusivist holds that the tenets or some of the tenets of one religion ... are in fact true. He adds 'that any other propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false'.<sup>9</sup>

Below, I will reconsider this characterization. But for now I use it as a working definition of the term 'religious exclusivism'. 'Exclusivism' or 'general exclusivism' is defined analogously for the purposes of this contribution in the following way:

Implying the view that one (set of coherent) belief(s) is true and that propositions that are incompatible with this (set of coherent) belief(s) are false.

### Why There is Nothing Wrong with Exclusivism

After having defined religious exclusivism, we need to investigate what – if anything – makes it wrong. The charges that religious exclusivism is elitist, imperialist, and so forth (see section above) suggest that what makes it wrong has something to do with the cognitive hierarchy that is implied within it. Obviously, opposing truth with falsity, as an alethic definition suggests, implies a hierarchy between that which is (cognitively) superior and that which is (cognitively) inferior. Is this hierarchy thus what makes religious exclusivism wrong?

However, the fact that a cognitive hierarchy is implied does not automatically discredit a position. After all, we assume there are cognitive hierarchies all the time and think that we are entitled to do so. For example, most of us think we are in a cognitively superior position compared to people who believe that the earth is flat. Or, to provide another, more burning example, many of us think ourselves to be in a cognitively superior position compared to people who deny the serious consequences or even the existence of Covid-19. We think that people who, for example, deny that the death toll caused by Covid-19 is significantly less than four million worldwide (at

9 Plantinga, 'Pluralism', 295, repeated in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 440. Plantinga makes additional stipulations on what characterizes exclusivism (e.g. that you do not have arguments that convince everyone; see McKim, *On Religious Diversity*, 22–23, n. 8). Yet I disregard them here. For other alethic definitions of exclusivism, see, e.g. David Basinger, *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 4–5; Jerome Gellman, 'In Defence of a Contested Religious Exclusivism', *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 401–17 (p. 401); William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth 2001), 163.

the time of writing) got it wrong. The reason that we assume the Covid-19 sceptic's position to be inferior to ours is that their position fails to represent reality truthfully. We thus do not take their beliefs seriously but assume that they are based upon wishful thinking, lack of reliable information, a deliberate attempt to distort reality (motivated, say, by the desire to avoid inconvenient Covid-19 restrictions), and so forth.

Exclusivism is therefore not blameworthy, and it is even obligatory in some cases. We *should* insist that beliefs that take Covid-19 seriously are true (if we have good reasons to assume that they represent reality adequately) and that the sceptic's beliefs are false. We are thus obliged (in moral and/or epistemic ways) to stick to a cognitive hierarchy in cases like this one. If we did not insist on the falsity of the sceptic's beliefs, we would be accomplices in attempts to downplay the consequences of Covid-19. Yet false beliefs can lead to taking wrong actions, for instance, failing to implement restrictions in cases in which they should be implemented. And a failure to implement necessary restrictions can have extremely detrimental consequences in the case of Covid-19. It jeopardizes the well-being and even the lives of many people. If we want to avoid those detrimental consequences, we must therefore avoid holding false beliefs. We thus have a (moral and/or epistemic) duty to mark beliefs as being false in cases like this one.

In sum, the distinction between truth and falsity always implies a (cognitive) hierarchy. Assuming such a hierarchy is thus nothing but natural, in some cases even obligatory. So, if natural and/or obligatory, it cannot be held against religious exclusivism. The fact that religious exclusivism implies a (cognitive) hierarchy is thus not a sufficient reason to consider it to be blameworthy.

### Why the Notion of Falsity Matters

The duty or, at least, right to make exclusivist claims is particularly pertinent when we make ontological claims. When we describe reality – in contrast to, say, distorting it for aesthetic purposes, as in expressive forms of art – ordering claims in a cognitive hierarchy is mandatory. The reason is a straightforward one: There is only one and not more than one reality. Thus, when we wish to describe it adequately, there cannot be more than one true description of it. All those descriptions which are incompatible with the one true description must therefore be false by necessity. And since we should avoid holding false beliefs, we should exclude them. We thus have a (moral and/or epistemic) *duty to be exclusivists*.

That we have a duty to be exclusivists presupposes an ideal cognitive situation and does not address the question of whether our *de facto* cognitive situations match this ideal. I will discuss below to what extent they do. Yet at this point in the argument, I think it is important to emphasize our epistemic right to insist on the notion of falsity for two reasons.

The first is that I am on the record as criticizing the use of the notion of falsity in the context of my critique of bivalent concepts of truth (see below, Bivalence). Yet I wish to safeguard that criticism from the misunderstanding that it implies a wholesale rejection of this notion. My point is that the notion of falsity should not be used in particular kinds of cognitive circumstances. But this does not take away from the fact that it should be used in other circumstances. For example, we have the right to consider the belief that the earth is flat or that Covid-19 is a hoax to be false. In cases where the evidential situation is as clear as it is in those cases, we are entitled or even obliged to use the notion of falsity.

Another reason why I emphasize the notion of falsity has to do with a related, equally burning issue, viz. the emergence of talk about ‘alternative facts’ or ‘post-truth’. If we wish to resist this talk – as I do – we need to emphasize the difference between truth and falsity. We need to insist that people who misrepresent reality do not provide alternative facts but have got it wrong. For example, if the claim that more people joined the inauguration of Donald Trump as president in 2016 than at previous inaugurations misrepresents reality, then this claim is plainly false. It is *not* alternative but false – and people who misrepresent reality are either ill-informed or, if they twist reality deliberately, are lying. Insisting on the notion of falsity shows that talk of ‘alternative facts’ is a non-starter: there are no alternative facts since there is no alternative reality. Suggesting that there is is just a fancy term for licensing ignorance or for lying.

In the context of criticizing talk of ‘post-truth’, I would like to repeat my warnings against postmodernist denigrations of truth. They play into the hands of the people insisting on ‘alternative facts’, QAnon, scepticism regarding Covid-19, and so on. When Richard Rorty reduces truth to ‘what your peers will let you get away with’<sup>10</sup> or Giovanni Vattimo suggests that truth is an ‘enemy of the open society and specifically of any democratic politics’,<sup>11</sup> we should be more sceptical now than we needed to be, say,

10 See Dirk-Martin Grube, “Justified Religious Difference”: A Constructive Approach to Religious Diversity’, in *Philosophical Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Grube and Van Herck, 47–55 (p. 54, n. 9).

11 Giovanni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 36.



twenty years ago. Whereas we could tolerate those provocations as (more or less) interesting challenges to standard philosophical doctrines, we need to be more aware of their detrimental political consequences now. For example, what enabled Jeff Ravensberger to stand his ground against Donald Trump pressuring him to ‘find’ more votes for the Trump camp in Georgia was nothing other than truth. Ravensberger insisted that reality, the real number of votes in this case, should be represented adequately, truly. Truth is thus not a threat to democracy but its stronghold. Given the emergence of ‘alternative facts’, it is *the* way to defend civilized society against the manipulators taking it over.

### Situations of (Cognitive) Ambiguity and Exclusivism

Thus far, we have seen that exclusivism is not wrong. Yet can it *become* wrong? That is, although not wrong in and of itself, can it be *used* inappropriately? Are there circumstances in which it is counterproductive, unwise, immoral, and so forth to be exclusivist? To answer this question, I will discuss another example, again taken from the discussion on Covid-19.

Currently there is some discussion on the use of medication to minimize the effects of Covid-19. At the time of writing, there is, for instance, discussion on the drug ivermectin. There is some evidence that it helps minimize the serious effects of Covid-19.<sup>12</sup> Thus, some physicians hold the belief that it is effective against Covid-19. Let us call this belief *B*. Others, however, reject *B* and hold that its effectiveness is not yet proven in a ‘scientific’ manner.<sup>13</sup>

My point is not to take sides on *B*. Rather, this example serves the purpose of demonstrating that there exist situations of cognitive ambiguity. My point is that we should not distribute the bipolar pair of truth values over statements formed in situations of cognitive ambiguity. In this case, we should neither suggest that *B* is true nor that it is false. We should thus *not be exclusivists in situations of cognitive ambiguity*.

We should not be exclusivists in those situations because we should not overstretch the available evidence. If we were exclusivists in those situations,

12 See, e.g. Andrew Bryant et al., ‘Ivermectin for Prevention and Treatment of COVID-19 Infection: A Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis and Trial Sequential Analysis to Inform Clinical Guidelines’, *American Journal of Therapeutics* 28, no. 4 (2021): 434–60, <https://doi.org/10.1097/MJT.0000000000001402>.

13 See, e.g. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, ‘Why You Should Not Use Ivermectin to Treat or Prevent Covid-19’, accessed 3 August 2021, <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/why-you-should-not-use-ivermectin-treat-or-prevent-covid-19>.

we would pretend to know more than we actually do. Our exclusivism would thus be unwarranted.

Furthermore, exclusivism is related to (having reasons for) action. And an unwarranted exclusivism could lead to providing reasons for taking wrong actions. For example, considering B to be false would probably lead to terminating further research on ivermectin since we do not want to waste scarce resources on researching a drug which is ineffective. The risk we run in this case is that we close the books on ivermectin prematurely and thus forfeit a chance to find a successful drug against Covid-19. Yet if we were to consider B to be true, we would also run risks, such as wasting money on an ineffective drug or providing a false sense of security. (People might be more easily inclined to neglect the restrictions if they think there is an effective cure against Covid-19.)

In sum, being exclusivist in situations of cognitive ambiguity would be dishonest and can lead to morally reprehensible consequences. We should thus *avoid an exclusivism in such situations*.

## Religious Beliefs are Formed under Conditions of Cognitive Ambiguity

We have defined religious exclusivism as a subspecies of general exclusivism. The above considerations on the latter therefore have consequences for religious exclusivism as well. This being the case, we can reject the assumption that the feature that makes religious exclusivism wrong is the exclusivism it implies. As demonstrated earlier, there is nothing wrong with exclusivism. And if nothing is wrong with exclusivism, it thus cannot make religious exclusivism wrong. The fact that religious exclusivism implies an exclusivism cannot be a knock-down argument against it. The charges that religious exclusivism implies an elitism, imperialism, and so on (as outlined above) are off the mark if they imply that its exclusivism makes religious exclusivism wrong.

Yet we have also seen that exclusivism can become wrong. It becomes wrong when held in situations of ambiguity, when a belief is considered to be true (or false) and a proposition incompatible with it to be false (or true) although the evidence does not support this. Since religious beliefs are formed under conditions of cognitive ambiguity (see below), religious exclusivism can thus become wrong. The proper charge against the religious exclusivist is thus not that they are exclusivist but, rather, that *they are exclusivist in circumstances in which they should not be exclusivist*.

The assertion that our religious claims are formed under conditions of ambiguity may sound provocative to some. If we are believers, we consider our religious beliefs to be true. Do we not have something like the ‘certainty of faith’? If so, how can ambiguity come into play?

In response, I would like to emphasize that I am speaking about strictly epistemic matters. The ambiguity I have in mind is of a purely cognitive kind. In this strictly cognitive sense, we *do* form our religious beliefs under conditions of ambiguity.<sup>14</sup> The ‘certainty of faith’, however, is of a different kind. When we say that we are certain about our religious beliefs, we mean, for example, the certainty of the heart, of tradition, of (mystic) intuition, or whatever. But those kinds of certainties are different from the kind of certainty we have in cognitive matters. The issue of the (un)certainly of faith thus differs from the issue of cognitive (non-)ambiguity. Given this distinction, it makes sense to suggest that we are certain about our faith even though we are cognitively ambiguous about it.

Let me also add that we are ambiguous in this strictly epistemic sense about many matters. An example is the question of why some people get a serious form of thrombosis after being vaccinated with Astra Zeneca. And there are entire realms of inquiry in which we do not know the truth of the matter and probably never will. Examples are the aesthetic, the foundational-physical, and, in my view, the moral domain. All those realms are important for human flourishing. That beliefs are formed under conditions of ambiguity does not therefore diminish their value for human life. When I suggest that religious beliefs are formed under conditions of cognitive ambiguity, I do not mean to diminish their value for human life in any way.

### **Hierarchical versus Dialogical Communication and Religious Exclusivism**

We need to distinguish between two different ways to communicate with people holding beliefs which differ from our beliefs. The first is the *hierarchical* approach: we assume that we possess the truth and that the person disagreeing with us holds false beliefs. In this case, the communication resembles a one-way street: we tell the person the truth and expect little in terms of truth from their side. We talk ‘to’ them rather than ‘with’ them.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which religions exhibit ambiguity, see McKim, *On Religious Diversity*, 140–50.

The other way to disagree is through the *dialogical* approach. By ‘dialogue’, I mean a non-hierarchical way according to which the communication is a two-way rather than a one-way street. In this case, we do not talk ‘to’ the person we disagree with but ‘with’ them. Talking ‘with’ the person does not necessarily mean that we will adopt their different beliefs. But it implies that we treat the other person as a peer: we listen carefully to their beliefs rather than try to ‘shoot them down’, will ‘mirror’ our own beliefs in light of theirs, will try to learn from them where possible, and so on.

Both ways of communicating have their merits. In certain cases, it is perfectly legitimate to communicate in a hierarchical way. An example of such a case is a discussion with a person believing that the earth is flat. In this case, the evidence is clear. There is no epistemic ambiguity, so we are (*prima facie*) epistemically entitled to disregard their deviating belief. Yet the case is different in situations in which cognitive ambiguity reigns. An example is the situation around ivermectin as sketched above. In cases like this, we should communicate in a non-hierarchical, dialogical way, because we have a greater chance to find truth if we engage in dialogue with beliefs differing from our own beliefs.

Above we noted that religious beliefs are formed in situations of cognitive ambiguity. Thus, the communication between religious believers who disagree should be dialogical rather than hierarchical. Yet religious exclusivism seems to rule out just that. The reason is that exclusivism implies the logic of true versus false. It entails that any beliefs which are incompatible with the (set of) true belief(s) are false. Yet, if they are false, we will not enter into a dialogue with them and not try to learn from them<sup>15</sup> – after all, we do not wish to learn from falsity.

Religious exclusivism thus seems to oblige us to communicate in a hierarchical rather than dialogical way. Yet we should communicate in a dialogical way in the realm of religion. This exclusivism, then, seems to rule out the kind of communication we should engage in for epistemic and/or moral reasons. *Religious exclusivism thus seems to be at odds with our epistemic and/or moral obligations.*

This raises the question of whether it can be reconstructed in such a way as to be compatible with our epistemic and/or moral obligations. In order

<sup>15</sup> This is the reason why I have charged exclusivism as ruling out a robust interreligious dialogue. See Dirk-Martin Grube, ‘Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness versus Exclusivism and Pluralism: Towards a Robust Interreligious Dialogue’, in *Religious Truth and Identity in an Age of Plurality*, ed. Oliver Wiertz and Peter Jonkers (London: Routledge 2019), 182–99 (pp. 186–87).

to address this, we should reconsider the way we have defined religious exclusivism, namely as an opposition between holding some religious beliefs to be true and incompatible ones to be false (see the opening section on the definition of terms). I will do just this in the following by first delving into the background of the opposition between truth and falsity, viz. a bivalent concept of truth.

## Bivalence

The logical *principle of bivalence* implies that there are only two truth values, true and false. According to this, every declarative sentence expressing a proposition (of a theory under inspection) has exactly one truth value and not more than one. It is either true or false. This 'either/or' is a strict one, an exclusive alternative. There is no third option.<sup>16</sup>

The exclusive alternative between true and false implies that all those propositions which are implied in beliefs that differ from the true beliefs in relevant ways *must* be false. Since they are not true there is no other option left than to consider them to be false. The principle of bivalence/*tertium non datur* leaves no other choice. If we were to suggest that a belief containing propositions that differ in relevant ways from the true beliefs are *not* false, we would violate this principle.

Furthermore, we *must* choose. Not choosing is not an option under the principle of bivalence/*tertium non datur*. If a belief is a declarative sentence expressing a proposition, it must be either true or false where the either/or is a strict one. It must be one of them. It cannot be neither of them, nor can it be both of them.

Usually we hold our own beliefs to be true, certainly in religion. Applying bivalence/*tertium non datur* leads us thus to consider beliefs that differ from our own beliefs in relevant ways to be false. Since those beliefs are not true and there is only the exclusive choice between true or false, they cannot *not* be false. The principle of bivalence/*tertium non datur* thus entails the notion of falsity. Since this notion is linked to a cognitive hierarchy in communication, this principle leads us to communicate in hierarchical ways.

<sup>16</sup> In the theory of logics, this principle is distinguished from the principle of *tertium non datur*, the principle of excluded middle according to which the alternative between true or false is exclusive. There is thus no other, no third option. However, for our purposes here, I do not distinguish between them and speak of 'bivalence/*tertium non datur*' in the following.

Yet, in religion, communication should be dialogical rather than hierarchical (see above). Thus, applying the principle of bivalence/*tertium non datur* sets us on the wrong foot regarding communication in religion.

This is the reason why I have criticized applying this principle in inter-religious communication.<sup>17</sup> Yet this criticism has been challenged on the grounds that bivalence/*tertium non datur* is indispensable.<sup>18</sup> That challenge, however, misunderstands my intentions. I do not suggest abandoning bivalence/*tertium non datur en bloc*. Rather, I suggest that we need to distinguish between realms of inquiry in which this principle is applicable and realms in which it is not. Since religion belongs to the latter category, bivalence/*tertium non datur* should not be applied in religion.<sup>19</sup>

### A Justificationist Frame of Reference

Yet, if we abandon bivalence/*tertium non datur*, how can we avoid (postmodernist or related) trivializations of truth? Remember that we emphasized the importance of what truth stands for (see above, Why the notion of falsity matters). Also, as religious believers, we think that we hold our beliefs in non-arbitrary ways. We think that they cannot be substituted by different ones. Hence, we need a frame which allows us to make epistemic evaluations that preserve the rationale behind the notion of truth and allows us to pursue our faith in non-arbitrary ways.

As an alternative to a bivalent logic, different solutions are conceivable. One is to retreat to a three-valued logic, including the value '(temporarily) undecidable',<sup>20</sup> or even to a many-valued logic. Another solution is to retire the notion of truth (in certain domains of inquiry) since it is too closely interwoven with bivalence/*tertium non datur*. In this case we need a substitute that does the job truth does – that is, to provide epistemic evaluations that

17 See Dirk-Martin Grube, 'Justified Religious Difference', 49–53.

18 See, e.g. René van Woudenberg, 'An Epistemic Argument for Tolerance', in *Philosophical Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Grube and Van Herck, 56–63 and Vincent Brümmer, 'Grube on Justified Religious Difference', in *Philosophical Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Grube and Van Herck, 64–66. I am very grateful to Vincent Brümmer (1932–2021) for his response.

19 See Dirk-Martin Grube, 'Concluding Remarks', in *Philosophical Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, ed. Grube and Van Herck, 86–114 (pp. 90–95).

20 See Joseph Margolis, *The Truth about Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 44, passim. I would like to repeat here that I have learned the importance of criticizing bivalence from Margolis (1927–2021), as I have learned many other things during our thirty-five years of cooperation – for which I am very grateful.

provide sufficient reasons for holding beliefs on non-arbitrary grounds. One such concept is that of *justification*.

The notion I have in mind here is a philosophical one which differs from the theological notion of justification, such as that of the justification of the sinner, as well as from moral concepts of justice. Rather, I have a notion in mind according to which a person is or is not justified to hold a particular (set of) belief(s) on epistemic grounds.<sup>21</sup>

This notion of justification, on the one hand, allows us to get what we want from truth: it provides epistemic evaluations that provide sufficient reasons for holding beliefs on non-arbitrary grounds. It can thus do what we want truth to do. Hence, it allows us also to pursue our (religious) beliefs in non-arbitrary ways (if there are good reasons to do so).

Yet, on the other hand, it avoids the downsides of the principle of bivalence/*tertium non datur*. A justificationist framework avoids the logic of 'true versus false' and the hierarchical way of communication it implies. That believers hold their religious beliefs with good reasons does not mean that those beliefs are true in the sense specified here. Rather than true, they are justified (if they are based upon good reasons). And religious beliefs that differ from them are not necessarily false. Rather, they can be justified in a different way.<sup>22</sup> This framework thus allows us to avoid the identification of difference with falsity that we determined as being fatal for a dialogical way of communication. We can thus disagree with a person holding a different religious belief without having to communicate with them in a hierarchical way. Rather, we can communicate in a dialogical way.

The crucial difference between a justificationist and a truth-grounded frame of reference is that beliefs can be relativized to a (group of) person's cultural, historical, or other type of context more easily within the former frame than within the latter. For example, it is possible that people were justified in, say, the 1950s to believe that smoking does *not* cause cancer (let's call it C), although they are not justified to believe C now. Yet it would be absurd to suggest that C *was true* in the 1950s whereas it is not true now. The latter would imply that *reality itself*, not only our perception of it, has changed – which would obviously be nonsense. This example shows that

21 For a more comprehensive treatment of justification, see Grube, 'Concluding Remarks', 103–4.

22 Being justified in a different way can be a neutral statement but can also contain evaluations of a negative sort. Yet, even in this case, the negativity implied in considering a belief less justified than one's own is different, more moderate, than considering this belief to be straightforwardly false. It thus allows for a different treatment of those beliefs and the persons holding them than considering them to be false in the sense which bivalence/*tertium non datur* implies.

truth is geared towards reality itself whereas justification is geared towards our perception of it. Since the latter is relative to the historical context in a way in which the former is not, justification can cater to person- and context-relativity in a way in which truth cannot.

Yet, justification's context- and person-relativity does not commit us to a fully-fledged relativism. It does not imply that it is arbitrary which one of two competing beliefs we choose. We may have been justified to believe C in the 1950s but are not justified to believe C now. A justificationist framework thus allows us to maintain epistemic evaluations. This is also the reason why it allows us to maintain our religious beliefs in a non-arbitrary way (if there are good reasons for them).

In sum, justificationism allows us to avoid a relativism while not committing us to the undesirable cognitive hierarchy of 'true versus false' that is implied in bivalence/*tertium non datur*.

### Broken Superiority, Humble Exclusivism

What would a religious exclusivism look like if we were to reconstruct it under a justificationist rather than a bivalent frame of reference? The first thing to note is that we would need to modify its definition: rather than defining it along alethic lines, we should define it along justificationist lines. Rather than insisting that a belief is true, we insist that it is justified to hold it, given a particular context of justification.

What are the consequences of this switch of frames for the exclusivist? Our (justificationist) exclusivist can hold on to their exclusivist religious beliefs just as the alethic exclusivist can. Yet the grounds on which they hold their exclusivist beliefs differ from the grounds on which the alethic exclusivist holds theirs. Rather than assuming that their religious beliefs are true in the bivalent sense, our (justificationist) exclusivist assumes that they are justified to hold on to them, given their context of justification. This difference in the grounds entails a difference in the *attitude* with which both hold their exclusivism. The alethic exclusivist believes that they possess the truth; our exclusivist is more modest, thinking that their right to be exclusivist is a relative one (e.g. relative to their context of justification). Consequently, they will propose their exclusivism in more humble ways than the former. This is why I call a religious exclusivism reconstructed under a justificationist frame of reference a *humble exclusivism*.

A humble exclusivism allows the exclusivist still to believe in some kind of superiority. But it is a 'broken superiority'. A broken superiority implies



a particular kind of mindset, a modest one. This modest mindset differs from the mindset of a 'Dawkinsian' superiorist. The moderate superiorist will stay away from ascribing any kind of principled (cognitive) privileges to themselves or their tradition. Rather, they will insist that their way to be exclusivist is the best way they can think of to be exclusivist. But they will continue humbly that it is still *their* way and that it would be frivolous to identify their way with God's way.

In contrast to the alethic exclusivist, the humble exclusivist is not forced to consider all religious beliefs to be false if they differ from their own beliefs in relevant ways.<sup>23</sup> The switch to a justificationist framework allows for a breaking through of the unfortunate identification of difference with falsity (see above). When the humble exclusivist considers their own religious beliefs to be (cognitively) 'better' than competing ones, they do not do so in a 'Dawkinsian' fashion. The humble exclusivist does not look down upon different beliefs in a triumphalist way. They do not pretend that they possess The Truth and that everybody who disagrees with them is wrong. Rather, they will pursue their beliefs in a modest way, being aware of their limitations as a fallible human being.

### Theological Postscript

A (conservative) religious critic may now retort that they understand the reasons why I emphasize epistemic humbleness in religious affairs but that being humble is not the prime goal according to their religiosity. This might be their (fictitious) counterargument:

The prime goal in religion is to witness to God *as God*, absolute as He is in His glory. This implies that we need to insist on possessing the absolute truth on an unbroken rather than a broken notion of superiority and on an alethic, non-humble notion of religious exclusivism. We should insist that exclusivism implies a strict opposition between truth and falsity: our religious beliefs are true and propositions incompatible with them are false. Whatever speaks for a humble exclusivism must be subordinated to our prime task to witness to the absolute truth.

Although I understand the critic's point about absolute truth *theologically*, I am sceptical about the way they utilize it *epistemically*. The reason is that the religious claims we make are *our* claims, human claims. Our fictitious

23 Obviously, that they are not forced to consider all different religious beliefs to be false leaves the possibility open to consider some to be false.

critic makes the mistake of immediately identifying their truth claims, or the truth claims of their tradition, with The Truth. However, that is overhasty and, in some sense, even 'demonic'.<sup>24</sup> It implies claiming absolute validity for that which by its very nature is not absolute. It overlooks that we are what we are as humans – namely, human rather than godlike and, as I would like to add from a Christian viewpoint, *fallen*. If we wish to be faithful to our human situation, we cannot fail to be modest and pursue our religious claims in a humble spirit. *In via*, we see through a glass, darkly, and know only in part (after 1 Cor 13:12).

### About the author

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<sup>24</sup> On the demonic, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 134 and elsewhere. The demonic nature of identifying a particular religious tradition with The Truth is witnessed, for example, in the ISIS ideology.



# 3 Apostasy in Terms of Moral Deviance

*Robert Ermers*

## **Abstract**

Apostates often face serious problems. This contribution argues that the apostate does not merely give up religious beliefs but renounces their community's moral norms, declaring themselves a deviant and causing stigmatization for family members as well. Because of this, the apostate often has to switch over to a different community. Therefore, processes related to apostasy need explanations in social terms in addition to religious and psychological perspectives.

Apostasy involves several oppositions: not only the apostate versus their family members, and the apostate versus the community, but also the apostate's family members versus their community and the communities involved versus each other. Multicultural societies therefore need to deal with apostates without causing deep rifts between the different communities.

**Keywords:** apostasy, moral norms, community, religion, multicultural society

## **Apostasy: Defying Rules**

In most religions there are rules that discourage believers from giving up their faith or converting to another religion;<sup>1</sup> in some, apostasy can be punished with expulsion or even death.<sup>2</sup> An apostate is commonly understood as someone who defies religious rules or decides to give them up or as 'one who has renounced or forsaken his religious faith or given up

1 On the question of how religion can be defined, see William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9, 19.

2 Man Baker, 'Capital Punishment for Apostasy in Islam', *Arab Law Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2018): 439–61.

his moral allegiance'.<sup>3</sup> Apart from choosing this course of action themselves, individuals can also be *declared* apostates based upon evaluations of their behaviour, with similar consequences.<sup>4</sup>

In a broader sense,<sup>5</sup> an apostate is 'someone whose beliefs have changed and who no longer belongs to a religious or political group',<sup>6</sup> or ideological group,<sup>7</sup> and is 'one who has forsaken the faith, principles or party to which he before adhered'.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, the individual who forfeits important notions that are related to morality in a given community becomes an apostate, for example, 'an apostate from communism'<sup>9</sup> or 'an apostate to liberalism'.<sup>10</sup> In atheist circles being a 'good' person involves being an atheist, and a conversion to Christianity is not acceptable.<sup>11</sup>

## Moral Norms Keep a Group Together

Individuals who are members of a given group – they can be part of multiple subgroups – share in that group's identity.<sup>12</sup> Individuals derive an important part of their (ideal) identity from their membership.<sup>13</sup> Social psychological

3 Philip Babcock Grove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged, A to G* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986), 102.

4 The author wishes to thank Dr. Yvette van Osch for sharing her views and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

5 Hari Parekh and Vincent Egan, 'Apostates as a Hidden Population of Abuse Victims', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2020): 1–23 (p. 3).

6 *English Learners' Dictionary*, s.v. 'Apostate', accessed 26 September 2022, [www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/apostate](http://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/apostate).

7 Kira Jade Harris, 'Leaving Ideological Social Groups Behind: A Grounded Theory of Psychological Disengagement' (PhD diss., Edith Cowan University, WA, 2015), 31–60.

8 David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow, *The Religious Drop-Outs: Apostasy Among College Graduates* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), 30.

9 Chris Buckley, 'She Was a Communist Party Insider in China. Then She Denounced Xi', *New York Times*, 18 August 2020, accessed 26 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/18/world/asia/china-cai-xia-expelled-communist-party.html>.

10 *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, s.v. 'Apostate', accessed 26 September 2022, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostate](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostate). In the Dutch press Poland has been called an 'apostate' ('afvallige') from European Union (EU) values because of the ruling of the Polish Supreme court that the national Polish constitution has primacy over EU law.

11 Jana S. Harmon, 'Religious Conversion of Educated Atheists to Christianity in Six Contemporary Western Countries' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2019), 300.

12 Parekh and Egan, 'Apostates as a Hidden Population', 2.

13 Harris, 'Leaving Ideological Social Groups Behind'; K. J. Harris, E. Gringart, and D. Drake, 'Leaving Ideological Groups Behind: A Model of Disengagement', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism*

research has shown that a group of people is held together when its members share the same moral values and views more than anything else, including social norms.<sup>14</sup> Group members who conform to a group's moral norms are perceived by their fellow group members as trustworthy, reliable, and showing integrity.<sup>15</sup>

Social identity theory argues that individuals occupy different social roles and are members of different social groups.<sup>16</sup> In each role they form a different social identity.<sup>17</sup> The combination of different social roles is not straightforward, because each group associated with a given identity may have its own set of moral norms which the individual needs to adhere to in order to be fully accepted and trusted. When these moral norms differ too much, the multiple identities may conflict with one another.<sup>18</sup>

## The Sources and Functions of Moral Norms

The moral norms of a group can derive from different sources. They can be part of ancient, unwritten customary laws or law systems.<sup>19</sup> Other communities lean on revered ideological or philosophical works, such as the works of Marx, Hume, Montesquieu, and Hobbes, for example. In religious communities the obvious sources for these moral principles are the testimonies of a deceased or still living prophet or preacher, transmitted (selected) scriptures of divine provenance, and written revelations. Religious groups use these for founding their interpretations of moral principles, which then may become moral convictions.<sup>20</sup> The interpretations of a given

*and Political Aggression* 10, no. 2 (2017): 91–109.

14 Naomi Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior: Groups as Moral Anchors*, European Monographs in Social Psychology (New York: Routledge, 2017).

15 Chiara Lisciandra, Marie Postma-Nilsenová, and Matteo Colombo, 'Conformality: A Study on Group Conditioning of Normative Judgment', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 4, no. 4 (2013): 751–64.

16 See the contribution by Kobus Kok in this volume, Chapter 8.

17 Henri Tajfel and J. C. Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William Austin and Stephen Worchel (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24; Jacobus Kok, 'Social Identity Complexity Theory as Heuristic Tool in New Testament Studies', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–9.

18 Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior*, 40.

19 See, for example, Amanda Perreau-Saussine and James Bernard Murphy, eds., *The Nature of Customary Law: Legal, Historical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

20 Linda J. Skitka, 'The Psychology of Moral Conviction', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4, no. 4 (2010): 267–81.

community's norms form an important part of the community's unique identity and contribute to the identity of its members.

Religious principles often form the foundations for moral values and norms.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, in religious communities there is a strong relationship between morality and religiosity. But there is more to it. Social psychological studies show that, in a more general sense, 'we tend to think of religious individuals as being more moral'.<sup>22</sup> In other studies prejudices were found against non-religious people, in particular atheists,<sup>23</sup> to the extent that 'Americans persistently view atheists as "lacking a moral center"'.<sup>24</sup>

While this tendency is certainly not true for all societies, especially in Western Europe where the population is generally highly secularized, in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Turkey, there is also a tendency to identify morality 'with religiosity to the extent that "having no religion" means to lack any moral sense'.<sup>25</sup> In addition, apart from membership of a community, religion is also related to one's nation or ethnicity. Many Americans still associate being American with being 'white and protestant',<sup>26</sup> or rather, white, of Anglo-Saxon descent, and protestant (WASP).<sup>27</sup> Turks predominantly associate being Turkish with being Muslim, and a similar attitude was found among Tatars and Hindus.<sup>28</sup>

21 Cavanaugh argues that religious belief by itself cannot be defined by a belief in God or transcendence, giving the example of Buddhism, which is regarded as both a religion and a philosophy. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 98–104. See also Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (Toronto: Knopf, 2014).

22 Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior*, 96.

23 Amy I. McClure, "Becoming a Parent Changes Everything": How Nonbeliever and Pagan Parents Manage Stigma in the U.S. Bible Belt', *Qualitative Sociology* 40, no. 3 (2017): 331–52 (p. 3).

24 Penny Edgell, Douglas Hartmann, Evan Stewart, and Joseph H. Gerteis, 'Atheists and Other Cultural Outsiders: Moral Boundaries and the Non-Religious in the United States', *Social Forces* 95, no. 2 (2016): 607–38 (p. 14).

25 Samuli J. Schielke, 'Being a Nonbeliever in a Time of Islamic Revival: Trajectories of Doubt and Certainty in Contemporary Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 301–20 (p. 309); Benjamin Hallahmi and Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief, and Experience* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997); also in Merve Kütük-Kuriş, 'Moral Ambivalence, Religious Doubt and Non-Belief Among Ex-Hijabi Women in Turkey', *Religions* 12, no. 1 (2021): article no. 33.

26 Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Random House, 2011).

27 In some (tribal) communities the customary laws have become revered sources of identity, on a par with religious sources (e.g. the *Pashtunwali* of the Pashtuns or the Albanian *Kanun*). Being a 'real' Pashtun means adhering to *Pashtunwali*.

28 Boris Wiener, 'Explaining a Choice of Denomination', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 19, no. 3–4 (2006): 337–51; for Tatars, see Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska and Michał Łyszczarz, 'Can a Tatar Move Out of Islam?' in *Moving In and Out of Islam*, ed. Karin Van

Because of these additional strong relations between religion, on the one hand, and ethnicity and morality, on the other, it seems that religious apostasy is likely to have more social consequences than non-religious apostasy.

## Loyalty and Commitment

One important term to describe an individual's adherence to a community's common moral norms and to being trustworthy in the eyes of its other members is loyalty. Loyalty makes a community stable<sup>29</sup> or possible.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, loyalty itself is considered a moral virtue and a moral ideal.<sup>31</sup> The individual is most loyal to people closest to themselves, typically family members,<sup>32</sup> while expecting loyalty more from family members than from other people.

Furthermore, there is a correlation between the sense of identity, loyalty, and the entitativity of groups. Entitativity scores express the way in which groups regard themselves as a coherent group.<sup>33</sup> For example, a group of people waiting together at a bus stop scores low on entitativity and on common identity. Not surprisingly, kinship and family groups score highest on entitativity in comparison to other groups.<sup>34</sup> Individuals simultaneously belonging to different groups often have multiple social identities and 'overlapping loyalties',<sup>35</sup> which sometimes conflict. For example, in the case of soldiers, loyalty to the nation comes first, even at the cost of their loyalty to family members.<sup>36</sup>

Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 152–53; for Hinduism, see Clemens Cavallin, 'Leaving Hinduism', in *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, ed. Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen (Leiden/Boston: Brill Academic, 2020), 13–27.

29 James M. Connor, *The Sociology of Loyalty* (New York: Springer, 2007).

30 Eric Felten, *Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

31 Bernard Gert, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 255–56.

32 Connor, *The Sociology of Loyalty*, 131.

33 Brian Lickel, David L. Hamilton, and Steven J. Sherman, 'Elements of a Lay Theory of Groups: Types of Groups, Relational Styles, and the Perception of Group Entitativity', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 2 (2001): 129–40.

34 Anna-Kaisa Newheiser, Takuya Sawaoka, and John F. Dovidio, 'Why Do We Punish Groups? High Entitativity Promotes Moral Suspicion', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2012): 931–37.

35 Ilan Zvi Baron, 'The Problem of Dual Loyalty', *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 42, no. 4 (2009): 1025–44 (p. 1040).

36 The divorce rates in the US are higher for 'those who have served two or more years on active duty'. Paul F. Hogan and Rita Furst Seifert, 'Marriage and the Military: Evidence That Those Who Serve Marry Earlier and Divorce Earlier', *Armed Forces & Society* 36, no. 3 (2009): 420–38 (p. 420).



## How Can Loyalty Be Determined?

How can people make clear that they are good, trustworthy, and loyal community members and conform to its moral norms? Apart from helping other community members and expressing loyalty towards them, there is also the need to express loyalty to abstract notions representative of or important to the community, such as (depending on the case) freedom, democracy, equality, communism, religion, and the nation state.<sup>37</sup> On a family level, individuals often want show that they are a 'good parent', a 'good spouse', or loyal to their children, all of which are important societal ideals.<sup>38</sup>

The expression of loyalty and commitment to these abstract notions occurs by paying respect to objects which represent them, such as flags, symbols, crucifixes, and others, and by participating in rituals, such as prayers, baptism ceremonies, circumcisions, weddings, funerals, commemorations, celebrations, feasts, and swearing oaths. Community members who (allegedly) do not respect these symbols or do not participate in rituals in the prescribed ways cast doubt on their loyalty and trustworthiness.<sup>39</sup>

Whether a given individual is loyal to the community and respectful of its rituals and symbols is a matter of interpretation. Other community members and (political) leaders claim they know who is a 'true Christian',<sup>40</sup> 'a true American Patriot',<sup>41</sup> a 'true Muslim',<sup>42</sup> or a 'true Nazi'.<sup>43</sup> In addition, they also believe they know who is absolutely 'wrong' or 'immoral', if not 'evil'<sup>44</sup> – that is, who is an apostate.<sup>45</sup>

In this way, individuals who according to their own interpretations believe they have done nothing wrong can still be *declared* apostates by others based upon (allegedly) deviant behaviour. Conversely, when people break with the extant and, in their view, stale outlooks and ideologies of their communities, they may declare the people who stick to those the actual apostates or heretics.

37 Connor, *The Sociology of Loyalty*, 13, 100–116.

38 Brittanie Aiello and Krista McQueeney, "How Can You Live Without Your Kids?": Distancing from and Embracing the Stigma of "Incarcerated Mother", *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 3, no. 1 (2016): 32–49.

39 Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior*, 97.

40 Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*.

41 Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

42 David R. Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives: Social Movements in Defense of Privilege* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13, 24, 29, 30, 39.

43 Gert, *Morality*, 10.

44 Skitka, 'The Psychology of Moral Conviction', 267.

45 Harris, 'Leaving Ideological Social Groups Behind', 164.

Although in Western societies tolerance is an important social and moral ideal, people, but also governmental institutions, find it difficult to cope with citizens who publicly renounce important but arguably multi-interpretable notions like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, or ‘equality’ and who disturb national commemoration rituals. In the Netherlands Dutch-born individuals with dual nationality suspected of not supporting democracy had their passports revoked and were declared illegal.<sup>46</sup>

All communities (and societies) have means to deal with individuals who denounce important moral norms or who, according to some criteria or interpretations, are believed to have done so. A challenge for many societies all over the world is to redefine their national identity in view of the manifold ethnic and other minorities present within them,<sup>47</sup> along with different and changing moral norms.

### The Apostate in Conflict with the Community

It is the apostate’s denial of ‘collective beliefs’ which, according to some,<sup>48</sup> causes angry responses from others: the individual no longer believes what they are supposed to believe in, which evokes frustration and anger.<sup>49</sup> Not merely ‘collective beliefs’ but also moral norms, religion, and community membership are intertwined. Renouncement of a community’s moral norms is therefore interpreted as giving up loyalty to the community and even one’s identity. Therefore, conversion to a religion that allegedly does not correspond to one’s ethnic identity can be considered an act of apostasy:<sup>50</sup> French converts to Islam allegedly commit ‘cultural apostasy’.<sup>51</sup>

46 For example, the case of Moussa Lghoul (aged 47), reported in the Dutch press: Andreas Kouwenhoven and Romy van der Poel, ‘Deze staatsgevaarlijk geachte man moet weg – “Als iemand bang voor mij is, is dat zijn probleem”’, *NRC*, 23 September 2021, accessed 26 September 2022.

47 For example, Dennis Grube, ‘How Can “Britishness” Be Re-Made?’, *The Political Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2011): 628–35.

48 Parekh and Egan, ‘Apostates as a Hidden Population’, 3.

49 Apostates may have numerous reasons to renounce those beliefs and their religion (Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993], 13–14; Harmon, ‘Religious Conversion of Educated Atheists’, 12–14), e.g. after facing abuse, as noted in William P. Cooper and Rahul Mitra, ‘Religious Disengagement and Stigma Management by African-American Young Adults’, *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 46, no. 4 (2018): 509–33 (p. 10).

50 Wiener, ‘Explaining a Choice of Denomination’.

51 William Barylo, ‘People Do Not Convert but Change: Critical Analysis of Concepts of Spiritual Transitions’, in *Moving In and Out of Islam*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 32.

It is therefore not coincidental that religious groups in this context occasionally use the notion ‘moral norms’. In the Netherlands a group of former Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2021 decided to apply to court to end the painful ostracism imposed by their former community members, including their families. In a written statement, a spokesman of the Jehovah’s Witnesses used the phrase ‘who trespasses the *moral norms* of the Bible’.<sup>52</sup> Social psychologist Naomi Ellemers distinguishes between rejections of moral norms, on the one hand, and other norms (such as social norms and conventions), on the other.<sup>53</sup> Individuals who knowingly<sup>54</sup> break moral norms will be reprimanded or cannot be accepted and included in that group any longer.<sup>55</sup>

The apostate’s implicit or explicit renouncement of moral norms often has consequences. In terms of identity, the apostate, declared an immoral deviant, can be denied membership of their community. Community members are likely to distance themselves from their deviant fellow member with labels such as ‘un-Christian’, ‘un-Islamic’, ‘un-democratic’, ‘un-communist’, or ‘un-academic’. People who ostensibly do not respect national ideals are ‘not American’; instead, they are ‘un-American’, ‘un-Dutch’, or ‘un-Australian’.<sup>56</sup> All these labels indicate that the apostate is an immoral outsider, betrayer, defector, or traitor who has no place in the community.<sup>57</sup>

52 Caroline van den Heuvel, “‘Je wordt sociaal doodverklaard als je eruit stapt”, ex-Jehova Henri spant samen met anderen rechtszaak aan tegen zijn voormalige geloofsgemeenschap’, *Avrotros*, 23 September 2021, accessed September 23, 2021, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/je-wordt-sociaal-doodverklaard-als-je-eruit-stapt-ex-jehova-herni-spant-samen-met-anderen-rechtszaak-aan-tegen-zijn-voormalige-geloofsgemeenschap/>. Italics mine.

53 Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior*, 38.

54 Important, too, is that they do this voluntarily and consciously. Thanks to Razi Quadir for highlighting this (cf. Rudolph Peters and Gert J. J. De Vries, ‘Apostasy in Islam’, *Die Welt des Islams* 17, no. 1/4 [1976]: 1–25 [p. 6]). Individuals of diminished moral responsibility or capacity, such as minors and people with mental problems, are unlikely to be held responsible for any type of moral deviance. See Donald Arthur Andrews and James Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 5th ed. (New Providence, NJ: Matthew Bender, 2010), 36, 170.

55 Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior*; Jozanneke Van der Toorn, Naomi Ellemers, and Bertjan Doosje, ‘The Threat of Moral Transgression: The Impact of Group Membership and Moral Opportunity’, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 5 (2015): 609–22.

56 Connor, *The Sociology of Loyalty*; reference to Philip Smith and Tim Phillips, ‘Popular Understandings of ‘UnAustralian’: An Investigation of the Un-National’, *Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 4 (2001): 323–39.

57 Alex Heckert and Druann Maria Heckert, ‘Using an Integrated Typology of Deviance to Analyze Ten Common Norms of the U.S. Middle Class’, *The Sociological Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2004): 209–28 (p. 215); Avishai Margalit, *On Betrayal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017),

## Religious Apostasy

In studies in which the focus is on religious apostasy and the apostate's internal trajectory, the relation with morality is only mentioned in passing. Maria Vliek, who conducted in-depth interviews with apostates from Islam, notes that '[l]eaving one's religion, however, could be seen as becoming without any morality'.<sup>58</sup> She does not, though, elaborate on the social consequences of this. Simon Cottee, however, concludes that 'ex-Muslims in the West must manage the moral stigma attached to apostasy within their own communities' and that 'there can be no doubt that apostasy is a moral problem: for *the apostate*'.<sup>59</sup> More about this moral stigma later.

In Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources, there are provisions on how to deal with apostates. In Islamic law apostasy is punishable,<sup>60</sup> although this is debated,<sup>61</sup> and therefore, this is also the case in some Islamic countries.<sup>62</sup> Islamic law uses the term *takfir*, which means 'to declare someone a *kāfir*', a 'disbeliever', after which the individual is excommunicated from the Islamic community (the *ummah*) because of *kufr* (disbelief).<sup>63</sup> The Sunnite Pakistani Salman Rushdie was declared an apostate by the Shi'ite Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini after he referred in his novel *The Satanic Verses* to an otherwise known incongruity in the text of the Qur'ān.<sup>64</sup> Both governments and extremists (such as ISIS) have effectively declared entire groups to be apostates (that is, immoral deviants) based not upon the actual behaviour of individual members but on their ideologies (e.g. the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan).<sup>65</sup>

58 Maria Vliek, 'Neither In nor Out: Former Muslims Between Narratives of Belonging and Secular Convictions in the Netherlands and the UK' (PhD diss., Radboud Universiteit, 2020), 175.

59 Simon Cottee, *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (London: C. Hurst, 2015), italics original.

60 Note that the Prophet Muḥammad was, in fact, an apostate himself when he renounced the religion of his community in Mecca after receiving revelations through the archangel Jibril (Gabriel) from about 610 CE.

61 See the contribution of Razi Quadir in this volume, Chapter 12.

62 For an overview, see Katarzyna Wiktoria Sidło, "Coming Out" or "Staying in the Closet"—Deconversion Narratives of Muslim Apostates in Jordan', *Marburg Journal of Religion* 18, no. 1 (2016).

63 In Islam 'it is strongly prohibited to declare another Muslim as infidel or apostate'. Recep Doğan, 'The Usage of Excommunication (Takfir) in the Ideology of Justice and Development Party (the AKP), Political Islamists of Turkey', *Issues in Social Science* 6, no. 2 (2018): 54–68 (p. 56). The notion behind this is that God alone decides who is a real Muslim.

64 M. M. Slaughter, 'The Salman Rushdie Affair: Apostasy, Honor, and Freedom of Speech', *Virginia Law Review* 79, no. 1 (1993): 153–204.

65 Göran Larsson, 'Apostasy and Counter-Narratives – Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Example of the Islamic State', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2017): 45–54.

Religious excommunication has also been used as a political instrument to control dissenters.<sup>66</sup> For example, in 1995 the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was declared an apostate by the Egyptian government.<sup>67</sup> Excommunication or banishment means in practice that the individual must be left without support both from fellow community members and relatives and should not even be talked to.<sup>68</sup> The impact of social exclusion and forms of ostracism on humans for whatever reason is immense and described in an abundance of social psychological studies.<sup>69</sup> When people feel excluded or ostracized, even in the slightest manner, they immediately experience a negative change in their mood.<sup>70</sup>

### The Apostate in Conflict with Their Family

In the studies on apostasy in religious environments mentioned above, respondents freely talk about the relationship with their family members and the wider community. Most respondents describe how they were given the cold shoulder from community members, yet what hurts them most is that they find themselves ostracized by family members as well.<sup>71</sup>

Apostates undergo an internal trajectory – carefully and elaborately outlined by scholars such as Joshua Iyadurai,<sup>72</sup> Simon Cottee, Maria Vliek, and Roni Berger – and some eventually decide to tell their family members or do so when those family members sense something is not right. A range of intrafamilial arguments then begin, following a similar course as one related to (other) moral issues. After the family has found out, and while the community is still unaware, family members try to ‘talk sense’ into the

66 Recep Doğan, ‘The Usage of Excommunication (Takfir) in the Ideology of Justice and Development Party (the AKP), Political Islamists of Turkey’, *Issues in Social Science*, 54–68.

67 Navid Kermani, ‘From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur’an’, in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 169–92.

68 Grégoire Chamayou, *Les chasses à l’homme* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2010).

69 For example, Kipling D. Williams, *Ostracism: The Power of Silence* (New York: Guilford, 2001).

70 Anita Smith and Kipling D. Williams, ‘R U There? Ostracism by Cell Phone Text Messages’, *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 8, no. 4 (2004): 291–301.

71 Cottee, *The Apostates*; Vliek, ‘Neither In nor Out’; Roni Berger, ‘Challenges and Coping Strategies in Leaving an Ultra-Orthodox Community’, *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice* 14, no. 5 (2015): 670–86.

72 Joshua Iyadurai, ‘The Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversions in India’, *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 4 (2011): 505–21.

apostate.<sup>73</sup> If this fails, other processes start, during which some families (not all) will eventually cut off the apostate.

In religious communities, associates may use religious arguments, for example, '[o]ne participant cited her mother saying "If I have to choose between you and God, I'd choose God."' <sup>74</sup> Family members may say things like, 'I don't want anything to do with you, you're not my daughter,' <sup>75</sup> or they may not respond to emails and telephone calls. <sup>76</sup> Some respondents were officially declared dead by their family members, and a funeral was held. <sup>77</sup>

The focus on the perspective of the apostate and the religious environment is, I suggest, the reason why examining exactly what lies behind family members' responses remains an underrepresented area. <sup>78</sup> Apart from religious motives and fears of internal disagreements, there are reasons to believe that most family members understandably also fear a moral stigma-by-association.

## The Apostate's Family and the Community

Like any transgression of moral norms – that is, moral deviance – apostasy may cause a stigma, which does not stick solely to 'the person who leaves'. 'It is shameful also for the leaver's family, because the stain of apostasy risks marking and contaminating the family too.' <sup>79</sup> In other words, the associates fear a stigma-by-association or a courtesy stigma. <sup>80</sup>

Families are specifically vulnerable to such a derived or courtesy stigma because their members are more emotionally tied to one another than other groups, and families score highly on the entitativity scale. <sup>81</sup> Community members more often hold families responsible for a deviant member's behaviour than they do other groups. For this reason, families may get in

73 Berger, 'Challenges and Coping Strategies', 674.

74 Berger, 'Challenges and Coping Strategies', 674.

75 Cottee, *The Apostates*.

76 Berger, 'Challenges and Coping Strategies', 674.

77 Berger, 'Challenges and Coping Strategies', 674.

78 Cottee, while acknowledging that the effect of the apostasy is a moral stigma both for the apostate and their relatives, does not elaborate on the latter's fears over this stigma.

79 Cottee, *The Apostates*.

80 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Rachel Condry, *Families Shamed: The Consequences of Crime for Relatives of Serious Offenders* (Cullompton: Willan, 2007).

81 Lickel, Hamilton, and Sherman, 'Elements of a Lay Theory of Groups'; Robert Ermers, *Honor Related Violence: A New Social Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

trouble when other community members learn about the issue. As a result, conflicts may arise between the apostate's closest and tightest in-group, their family, on the one hand, and the community as a whole, on the other.

In their accounts apostates do occasionally refer to the fears of their families. One apostate states that the family members did not want to be 'looked at differently' and feared 'losing respect'<sup>82</sup> in the community. According to one of Cottee's respondents, keeping silent 'is about protecting his own family and especially his children from the censure that would inevitably be targeted at them were his apostasy to be exposed. "Have my kids ridiculed at school, my wife ridiculed by the community? No. So it's to safeguard them really."<sup>83</sup>

Some associates said they fear being 'stoned to death in church if they found out that my son was an atheist that supported gay people'<sup>84</sup> or considered that the apostate's actions 'will destroy the chances of [her] sisters ever getting married, you're going to wreck their lives'.<sup>85</sup>

## Giving up the Deviant

After community members have become aware of the issue and talking sense into their family member has failed, many families find themselves between a rock and a hard place. If they stay loyal to their beloved (deviant) family member, they risk social stigmatization in the community, including of their children. Yet, if they distance themselves from their family member, the family as a whole will be relatively safe, although all family members will feel very hurt. Because of this dilemma, many families feel betrayed by the apostate. Many of Rachel Condry's respondents, close family members of someone convicted of a serious crime, were abandoned by other members of their families and by friends;<sup>86</sup> most were afraid to go out on the street for fear of comments or hostile glances – some were actually spat at in their faces by neighbours.<sup>87</sup> Relatives who distanced themselves from the deviants were more successful in recovering their social lives than those

82 Vlieg, 'Neither In nor Out', 112.

83 Cottee, *The Apostates*.

84 Kristen Rurouni, 'Swept Under the Rug', in *Atheists in America*, ed. Melanie E. Brewster (Columbia University Press, 2014), 126–31 (p. 130).

85 Cottee, *The Apostates*.

86 Condry, *Families Shamed*, 145.

87 Condry, *Families Shamed*, 79–80.

who did not; they felt that the consequences of the stigma-by-association were alleviated.<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, once the problem is known in the community, family members may feel they have no other choice than to publicly give up on the deviant. (It needs to be noted, though, that not all families give up their apostate family member. Many do stay on speaking terms, sometimes in secret.<sup>89</sup>)

## Two Opposing Communities

Apostasy also has consequences on another level, that of the communities. Communities often tend to regard their own moral rules as logical and, sometimes, superior,<sup>90</sup> and, it seems, welcome newcomers who have reached 'new' insights and left their 'backward' beliefs behind. In this context, I believe, there are at least two opposing communities. A multicultural society is, I contend, actually often a multi-community society, which comprises communities with distinct moral norms that are not always compatible.

Nevertheless, in a multi-community society there are inevitably individuals who want to switch. These switches, which in my opinion can be interpreted as acts of apostasy, often involve an implicit or explicit renouncement of the moral norms of one's community as well as an abandonment of one's identity and everything associated with it – even if this was not the intention of the individual. (Note that in 'free' societies too, individuals are not entirely free to believe that, for example, 'democracy is no good', for they can be labelled 'un-democratic'.)

An act of apostasy therefore involves two communities. On the one side there is the community that is left by the apostate, including the apostate's family. On the other is the receiving community which the apostate aspires to enter or has already entered. For members of either of these communities, it may be difficult to understand the perspective of the other (whereas the apostate to some extent has an understanding of both). For example, some religious people may have difficulties in understanding how someone who abandons their religious beliefs, thereby causing hurt to their family members, could still be a moral person. The non-religious wonder how one

88 Condry, *Families Shamed*, 145.

89 Maria Vlieg, "Speaking Out Would Be a Step Beyond Just Not Believing": On the Performativity of Testimony When Moving Out of Islam', *Religions* 10, no. 563 (2019): 2–20 (p. 174).

90 Naomi Ellemers and Kees van den Bos, 'Morality in Groups: On the Social-Regulatory Functions of Right and Wrong', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 12 (2012): 878–89.



can still be ‘free’ and support ‘equality’ and ‘democracy’ if one has decided to obey God first.

In their former community, the apostate causes feelings of hurt, grief, and perhaps anger, whereas they feel comfortable as they are being affirmed by members of the receiving community. Members of the latter appear hardly interested in the consequences this step has for the apostate’s associates and their community.<sup>91</sup>

This can be illustrated by the case of Lale Gül (aged 23), a student at Amsterdam University, who in 2021 published a novel *Ik ga leven* (I will live) about her youth in a conservative Turkish Muslim immigrant family in Amsterdam. In her novel she ridicules what, in her view, are the superficial Islamic religious notions and empty rituals her family adheres to. She especially lashes out at her mother, whom she calls ‘Carbuncle’ in her book. Apart from this, Gül describes in quite explicit terms the secret and forbidden sexual relationship she had with Freek, a Dutchman. During interviews she stressed that her novel is 95 percent autobiographical. In addition, Gül repeatedly stated that she now considered herself not merely an apostate but even an atheist and an Islamophobe.

Many members of the majority Dutch society, such as politicians and journalists, hailed her as having ‘liberated’ herself from her ‘backward’ and ‘rigid’ Islamic background, comparing her to authors of Protestant and Catholic backgrounds before. Gül was considered a courageous heroine – even more so when she received threats from people from the Turkish Muslim minority community.

In the meantime, there was much less interest for the fate of Gül’s family members. In interviews, Gül herself mentioned how her parents, brother, younger sister (aged 10), uncles, and minor cousins were harassed by phone calls and degrading comments from the Turkish Muslim community both in the Netherlands and abroad. Her mother fell into a depression, among other things because she believed neither she nor Lale could enter heaven because she had made mistakes in her daughter’s upbringing.<sup>92</sup> Gül’s younger sister and brother (aged 20), hurt and upset by the commotion, had begged Lale not to appear in public anymore and draw negative attention to herself and their family – which she refused. There are ample reasons to believe that Gül’s step, which the majority community cheered, had a tremendous negative

91 Harmon, in her excellent study, does not however elaborate on the fact that the communities may have opposing attitudes nor on the position of family members (Harmon, ‘Religious Conversion of Educated Atheists’).

92 For which, see for example, Vlieg, “Speaking Out”, 174.

impact on her family members. The stigma-by-association experienced by the Gül family is likely to lead to intrafamilial tensions and may have a strong psychological impact on her family members, including her young sister. Yet these consequences are by and large ignored by the receiving community.

### **Apostasy in a Multicultural Society**

In this contribution I have shown that moral norms are the cement of any community. Community members are expected to adhere to a particular interpretation of those moral norms and pay respect to important symbols and rituals. Only individuals who (outwardly) adhere to the moral norms of their community are considered morally good and trustworthy, this evaluation being made by other community members.

Religion in this setting occupies a special place. I showed that some religious communities associate their religious norms with moral norms. Furthermore, an individual's adherence to their religion and religious community symbolizes their identity and ethnicity, their affiliation and loyalty to their family and their community. In some areas, the Middle East for example, moral norms are often considered to correlate with one's religion, whereas in secularized or non-religious communities in Western Europe, this is much less the case.

Yet in a multi-community society, there are inevitably individuals who want to switch to another community or who (allegedly) defy the local interpretation of moral norms. Because the break from their original community involves the renouncement of moral norms, including their family and their identity, this is painful. I have argued that in studies conducted thus far, some important aspects of apostasy tend to be overlooked or underestimated. First, (religious) apostasy is often interpreted as an implicit (or explicit) renouncement of the moral norms of a community and of individual people, even if the apostate does not wish to consider it in this way.

Second, apostasy, because of its relation to morality, is likely to cause a stigma-by-association, feared or already experienced by the apostate's family members, including small children, which may cause harsh responses to the apostate.

Third, I suggest that acts of apostasy and responses to it may deepen existing discrepancies between communities, an issue also often overlooked. In a multicultural society, apostates from minority communities must of course be welcomed in their new environment and find themselves well-protected against violence. Yet excessively celebrating apostates in

the receiving community, while neglecting others, may cause pain and frustration to people in the original community and thus deepen the rift between communities. Majorities, including governmental institutions, tend to discourage and even punish apostasy 'from democracy' – yet to my mind governments can be expected to try to better understand these (would-be) apostates in order not to entirely estrange them. Even though they have switched to another community, they are still part of our society and will remain in our common future.

### **About the author**

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## 4 Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective

*Jack Barentsen*

### **Abstract**

Apostasy is a challenging concept in contemporary society. Social identity theory is a lens through which to interpret the identity dynamics of apostasy, since social identities are a psychological phenomenon by which individuals negotiate belonging to different groups while distinguishing themselves from other groups. Religious beliefs and practices are a significant element of many social identities. Apostasy, defined broadly as changing religious identification, implies a transgression of religious identity. Apostasy labels such a transgression as deviance from community beliefs, while individuals may also distance themselves from their community. Thus, apostasy involves communal and personal perspectives in a complex relationship of inclusion and exclusion, in which sacred 'apostasy' texts play an important role.

**Keywords:** social identity, apostasy, group boundaries, socio-religious identity, inclusion/exclusion

### **Introduction**

Apostasy is a counter-cultural concept for many Western Christians. A recent Dutch dissertation bemoaned the lack of moral clarity and the reluctance to administer church discipline in Dutch Baptist churches.<sup>1</sup> The study pointed out that Baptist churches are very hesitant in disassociating themselves from people who hold particular beliefs or behaviours that deviate from standard Baptist beliefs and practices. Another study, reported in this volume, indicates that individuals who hold to beliefs that differ significantly from

<sup>1</sup> Yme Horjus, 'Elkaar aanspreken: Een onderzoek naar het draagvlak voor tucht in de Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland' (PhD diss., Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2020).

their faith community often choose to disassociate themselves voluntarily; rarely does the faith community excommunicate them.<sup>2</sup> Believers may find it difficult to recognize apostasy, but more likely, they may find it inappropriate to label specific religious behaviour as apostasy. Within the postmodern cultural climate of north-western Europe in the early twenty-first century, freedom of speech and thorough-going individualism underpin the climate of pluralism and multiculturalism. Tolerance of nearly any moral or religious position has become politically correct, rendering the very concept of apostasy suspect.

On the other hand, apostasy is an important concept in Islam. It involves a rejection of Islam, perhaps coinciding with conversion to another religion, which may take place in a number of ways.<sup>3</sup> Apostasy is often considered to be a capital offence, but a number of Muslim scholars and nations interpret the Qur'anic instructions on this differently, allowing for a sense of freedom of religion that is more aligned with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>4</sup> Also, many Islamic countries use political power to promote and control adherence to a particular version of Islam.<sup>5</sup> Thus, apostasy, the death penalty, religious liberty, and the role of political power are matters of debate for many Muslims.

Apostasy may be described theologically as a state of having lost one's faith or one's identification with a particular religious tradition.<sup>6</sup> This theological description may be meaningful within some religious communities, but it presents difficulties for a public, multireligious debate. Apostasy may also be described through social scientific analysis. For instance, sociologist David G. Bromley defines apostasy as a special case of group exit, 'a role that is constructed when an organization is in a high state of tension with its surrounding environment and that involves an individual exiting an organization to form an alliance with an oppositional coalition'.<sup>7</sup> In his research on New Religious Movements, Bromley focuses on the *role* of apostates in mobilizing social resistance and initiating public policy.

2 See the contribution by Laura Dijkhuizen and Jack Barentsen in this volume, Chapter 16.

3 Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (London: Routledge, 2017), 36–38.

4 Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion*, 167–75.

5 Göran Larsson, 'Apostasy and Counter-Narratives – Two Sides of the Same Coin: The Example of the Islamic State', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2017): 45–54.

6 Frank L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89.

7 David G. Bromley, 'The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistleblowers, and Apostates', in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 19–48 (p. 19).

Social scientific conceptions of apostasy can serve as a bridge across religious boundaries, facilitating interreligious conversation about identity, boundaries, deviance, and transgression. This contribution offers a perspective from social identity theory, a major theory in social psychology,<sup>8</sup> which describes the complexity of social identities, group formation, intergroup relationships, boundary negotiation, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. This social scientific language complements theological language in the study of apostasy. Divine reality is not only transcendent but also immanent, permeating human reality so that theological and social scientific language each have their place in academic reflections.

Below, I will first offer a brief general description of social identity theory, followed by specific aspects of the theory as it relates to inclusion and exclusion, with a special concern for the concept of apostasy.

## What is a Social Identity?

In our fluid age, ‘identity’ has become problematic and contested.<sup>9</sup> Scholars distinguish between personal, role, and social identity, usually seen as psychological and social constructions to give meaning to one’s interaction in particular contexts.<sup>10</sup> This contribution focuses on social identity, which is part of an individual’s self-concept as it relates to the group or groups to which one feels attached.<sup>11</sup>

A social identity is a ‘sense of us’, which is informed by similarities and differences with other group members as compared to outsiders. This is not an objective assessment of such similarities and differences but a matter of perception and rhetoric. Perceived similarities between group members (the ingroup) are accentuated (but not the differences), while simultaneously perceived differences from outsiders (the outgroup) are accentuated (but not the similarities). Within social identity theory, this dynamic has been found to be of such significance that it has been labelled ‘the metacontrast

8 Rupert Brown, *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2019).

9 Anthony Elliott, *Identity Troubles: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–15.

10 Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

11 Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1978), 63; Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 38–41; Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

principle'.<sup>12</sup> It captures the psychological phenomenon that social identity depends on the perception of relative similarities and differences in a given context.

Research indicates that social identities have three main dimensions.<sup>13</sup> The *cognitive* dimension relates to one's knowledge of the in- and outgroup and of the content that defines group identity. A religious identity is shaped around specific contents, such as its sacred texts, practices, beliefs, and values, often linked with a number of cultural dynamics that have become part of routine religious practice. The *affective* dimension relates to the emotions – both positive and negative – that are attached to group identity and thus to similarities with the ingroup and differences from the outgroup. This may relate to feelings of peace and happiness when meeting with fellow religionists, especially those who share much of one's religious identity, while anxiety or anger may influence attitudes and actions towards those 'outside' of the faith (that is, in relating to others who do not share and perhaps even contest one's religious identity). Finally, the *evaluative* dimension relates to the value group membership holds for the individual concerned in a particular context. Belonging to a group may give a sense of self-esteem, security, efficacy, or distinctiveness.

Social identities, then, are always comparative. Group members even perceive one another through the lens of their group membership. They tend to see each other as representative of the group more than they perceive each other through the lens of individual characteristics or behaviours. This phenomenon is labelled 'depersonalization'. For ingroup members, this is a judgement about the degree of fit of ingroup members relative to the idealized group. This idealized group is usually not an explicit conception of group identity and content but an intuitive sense of prototypicality: how some members are prototypical when compared to the other group members in general.<sup>14</sup> Members who are perceived as prototypical for the group are likely to have significant influence, whether formally as leaders or only informally.<sup>15</sup>

12 S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2004), 31–32.

13 Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 17–39; Daniel Belanche, Luis V. Casalo, and Carlos Flavián, 'Understanding the Cognitive, Affective and Evaluative Components of Social Urban Identity: Determinants, Measurement, and Practical Consequences', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 50 (2017): 138–53.

14 S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 66.

15 Michael A. Hogg, 'A Social Identity Theory of Leadership', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 3 (2001): 184–200 (pp. 190–91).

For outgroup members, depersonalization results in stereotyping, seeing the other mostly in broad terms that distinguish them from the ingroup. Such dynamics play an important role in the rise of various fundamentalist movements.<sup>16</sup>

On an individual level, this implies that group members who do not fit the group prototype very well have a marginal status within the group.<sup>17</sup> When their difference from the ingroup prototype is significant, relating to some of the core dimensions of their ingroup identity, such individuals may well be perceived as 'deviant' – that is, as differing to such an extent from the ingroup prototype that their participation might be experienced as endangering group identity.<sup>18</sup> This is often the origin of the stigma that deviant group members receive, making it very difficult for them to continue with their normal relationships with other ingroup members. This resembles the role of the 'apostate' in religious contexts as described by Bromley (see above).

On a group level, depersonalization becomes evident in how group members favour the ingroup and are inclined to advance its cause, labelled 'ingroup favouritism'. By contrast, outgroup members are relatively undervalued, a judgement that often has negative overtones known as 'outgroup derogation' or even 'outgroup demonization'.<sup>19</sup> Although derogation may simply be a positive evaluation of one's ingroup relative to outsiders as a normal process of interaction and negotiation, it always involves a degree of depersonalization, which in extreme forms may lead to dehumanization. Although this might appear as a gradual process along a continuum, there is a major conceptual difference between seeing other people mostly as representing a particular group and seeing them as less than human, 'as the enemy of our country', as some politicians have been heard to say about their political opponents. Such dehumanization removes barriers for violence between groups, so it is vital to not dehumanize the other, the outgroup, although they are inevitably seen as not representing 'us' but 'them'.<sup>20</sup>

16 Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 48–55.

17 Naomi Ellemers and Jolanda Jetten, 'The Many Ways to Be Marginal in a Group', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 17, no. 1 (2013): 3–21.

18 Jolanda Jetten and Matthew J. Hornsey, 'Deviance and Dissent in Groups', *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (2014): 461–85. See Rob Ermer, Chapter 3 of this volume, who works with the concepts of deviance and stigma.

19 Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 125.

20 See also Guy Elcherth and Stephen Reicher, *Identity, Violence and Power: Mobilising Hatred, Demobilising Dissent*, Identity Studies in the Social Sciences (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 99–125.



Overall, these attitudes indicate that individuals identify with their ingroup because they believe it is better, more effective, more valuable, more relevant, and so on in a particular context than one or more outgroups. This points to the role of various motivations for social identification. What motivates people to want to belong to a group? In the early stages of social identity theory, much emphasis was placed upon self-esteem and security as motivations for social identification. In other words, because a particular group boosted one's self-esteem or made one feel more secure in one's social environment, individuals were motivated to belong to the group. In more collectivist societies, perhaps the central focus is not self-esteem but group-esteem, the honour of the group, which is particularly relevant in cultures with an honour–shame orientation.<sup>21</sup> Currently scholars list not only self-esteem and security but also belonging, efficacy, distinctiveness, and beliefs as motivations for social identification. Depending on the context and the emotion, stronger or weaker attachments to relevant groups are generated.<sup>22</sup>

This 'sense of us', the perception of similarities and differences, and the role of different identity motives are all highly contextual. In one context one's professional identity as construction engineer or psychologist might be relevant, in another one's membership of a society or religious community, and in another one's belonging to a family/clan or neighbourhood. In highly differentiated societies, people may have many more social identities that are salient in different contexts and at different times than in less differentiated societies. Generally, though, individuals have no problem in 'switching' to the relevant social identity in a particular context: one intuitively thinks and behaves in a way that fits the context, such as acting professionally at one's place of work, cheering at a sports event, and caring for family at home. Hence, in various contexts, different social identities are salient, and persons intuitively switch to the salient social identity, which intuitively and immediately influences what they think and feel and how they behave.

It is clear, then, that individuals handle quite a few different social identities rather fluently. Sometimes one simply switches identity in situations that appear socially disconnected. At other times a particular social identity

21 See Ermers, Chapter 3 of this volume, who employs notions of group honour in his description of apostasy.

22 Vivian L. Vignoles, Camillo Regalia, Claudia Manzi, Jen Golledge, and Eugenia Scabini, 'Beyond Self-Esteem: Influence of Multiple Motives on Identity Construction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 2 (2006): 308–33; Daniel Bar-Tal, *Shared Beliefs in a Society: Social Psychological Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

appears to be dominant – often a cultural, ethnic, or religious identity – influencing or even overruling interaction in other spheres of identity. Again, in some contexts, these social identities are complementary, while in other contexts they compete or conflict.<sup>23</sup> The resulting identity negotiations in each context are particularly important for religious identities that claim a high or dominant position in the hierarchy of social identities as they influence social interaction. For instance, is religious or civic identity to be dominant in negotiations about the relative importance of freedom of speech and respectful speech about religious values? In anthropology the concept of hybridity has been developed in the study of migrants to indicate that elements and meanings of different ethnic and cultural identities are ‘combined, blended and mixed’ into newer forms of identity.<sup>24</sup>

How individuals manage to shape their social interaction while manoeuvring these various senses of identity is a highly complex, psychological phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> For the field of social identity, this has been developed into a fourfold typology in social identity complexity theory.<sup>26</sup> First, an individual may retain a single sense of ingroup identity by focusing on the area of overlap of two or more different social identities as providing the unifying identity (intersection), or, second, they may retain this sense by considering all social identities subordinated to one particular social identity (dominance). Third, individuals can also live with different social identities that are relevant in different contexts without attempting to construct a single unifying social identity (compartmentalization). Fourth, membership in various social identities may be combined into one superordinate social identity that, in consequence, is highly diverse and inclusive.<sup>27</sup> These various responses to multiple social identities are strongly influenced by people’s experiences in a pluralistic, highly diverse social society and by the level of identity or distinctiveness threat that they perceive.<sup>28</sup>

23 Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 39–40.

24 Anna Cieslik and Maykel Verkuynen, ‘National, Ethnic and Religious Identities: Hybridity and the Case of the Polish Tatars’, *National Identities* 8, no. 2 (2006): 77–93 (p. 78). See Chapter 6 of this volume by Henk Bakker on hybridity.

25 David Lester, *A Multiple Self Theory of Personality* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science, 2010); Hubert J. M. Hermans, ‘Dialogical Self in a Complex World: The Need for Bridging Theories’, *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2015): 1–4.

26 Sonia Roccas and Marilyn B. Brewer, ‘Social Identity Complexity’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6, no. 2 (2002): 88–106. See Chapter 8 of this volume, where Kok uses this theory in a New Testament study.

27 Roccas and Brewer, ‘Social Identity Complexity’, 90–91.

28 Katharina Schmid and Miles Hewstone, ‘Social Identity Complexity: Theoretical Implications for the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations’, in *Social Cognition, Social Identity*,

These few words about social identity theory explain some basic concepts of this complex and broad theory. Richard Jenkins has provided a general overview of the theory,<sup>29</sup> S. Alexander Haslam reviews its application to organizational aspects, such as leadership, motivation, conflict, power, and stress,<sup>30</sup> while others have described its extension into leadership theory.<sup>31</sup> For our purposes, we now turn to the specific concept of apostasy and the way this can be conceptualized from a social identity perspective.

## Apostasy as Transgression of Identity Boundaries

What are the implications of this understanding of social identity for this project's focus on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, with the specific foci on the concept of apostasy and selected sacred texts?

A question arises concerning the relationship between religious identity and social identity. Is religious identity simply a particular type of social identity? Undoubtedly, various groups and organizations have a distinctly religious identity. At a sociological level of analysis, the identity of a Christian charity or a Muslim school is mainly determined by their primary organizational characteristic as charity or school; yet their religious identity vitally influences their work and thus shapes their civic identity. This is the reverse in faith communities (churches, mosques), whose primary function and identity is religious, while their social, psychological, and economic dimensions are vital but secondary to their religious identity.<sup>32</sup> At an individual level of analysis, individuals may perceive the relative importance of their religious, civic, and other social identities differently. Social identity complexity theory, as discussed above, is a theoretical development that helps unravel this individual complexity.

This is important when discussing apostasy. Although apostasy involves losing or being denied one's identification with Islam or Christianity, it

*and Intergroup Relations: A Festschrift in Honor of Marilyn B. Brewer*, ed. R. M. Kramer, G. J. Leonardelli, and R. W. Livingston (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 77–102.

29 Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

30 Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, chs. 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10.

31 Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*, 32–73; Michael A. Hogg, Daan van Knippenberg, and David E. Rast, 'The Social Identity Theory of Leadership: Theoretical Origins, Research Findings, and Conceptual Developments', *European Review of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2012): 258–304; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*.

32 Elsewhere I have labelled this the socio-religious identity of a faith community. See Jack Barentsen, 'Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context', *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2015): 49–80 (p. 56–57).

almost always means losing one's place within a particular Muslim or Christian community, or within a network of communities (such as Roman Catholicism or Shiite Islam). This is evident in some situations where adherents of one tradition (whether Muslim or Christian) view adherents of another tradition (but within the same religion) as apostate. Even though contemporary trends of cultural tolerance and interreligious dialogue may suggest that concerns about apostasy are less prevalent today, many Christian and Muslim communities continue to hold exclusive beliefs, assuming or requiring identification with specific beliefs and practices at the risk of being considered apostate. Apostasy then implies disidentification with a particular faith community and its faith tradition.

Leaving one's faith is therefore by implication always leaving a particular community. Apostasy is thus not only a theological qualification of an individual leaving the faith but also a social qualification of an individual crossing or transgressing the identity boundary of a religious community.<sup>33</sup> Social identity theory points to the complexity of such a social move. It is not just a matter of disagreeing with one or more (core) components of one's religion, the cognitive dimension of socio-religious identity. In fact, some individuals manage to stay in their faith community even when they begin to differ in core beliefs (the cognitive dimension), as is demonstrated in well-known cases of theologians whose understanding of 'God' changed significantly.<sup>34</sup> Yet these theologians still valued participation in their faith community sufficiently to want to stay, and conceivably, their relationships within the community offered a significant affective appeal that motivated them. It is difficult to discern whether such pastors have in fact crossed religious boundaries, since they manifest important differences on some dimensions of social identity, while they continue to identify on other dimensions.

Currently there is more concern for people who have left a particular tradition<sup>35</sup> and also a concern for pastors who have experienced a growing divergence or even crisis in their alignment with the Christian community they serve.<sup>36</sup> These stories are not told from the perspective of the communi-

33 See Bromley, 'The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles', discussed above.

34 Klaas Hendrikse, *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat: Manifest van een atheïstische dominee* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2007); John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 40th anniversary edition (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

35 Otto de Bruijne, *Ooit evangelisch: De achterdeur van evangelische gemeenten* (Kampen: Kok, 2009).

36 Such as a current series of portraits on Dutch television of pastors who are 'Uitgepreekt', Evangelische Omroep/NPO2, accessed 16 July 2021, <https://www.eo.nl/programmas/uitgepreekt>.

ties the individuals left, which could label them as ‘marginal’ or even as ‘apostates’ since they left the communities’ practices and faith. Rather, they are narrated from the individual’s own perspective, displaying the social and religious complexity of their own process of change, disidentification, departure, and sometimes renewed identification with a different tradition. In other words, apostasy as leaving a community of faith is a highly complex process that involves cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of social identification, at both individual and communal levels. These dimensions overlap, but only partially, with certain core religious dimensions, such as practices, beliefs, and values. Together, these dimensions inform the process of apostasy as transgression of the socio-religious identity of the community.

### Dynamics of In/Exclusion

This brings us to a discussion of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. How is it that individuals come to be and/or feel included in a community of faith, or alternatively, be and/or feel excluded?

Theologically, apostasy is conceived not merely as a change of social identification but as a transgression of religious identity. Certain sacred texts mark this transgression, such as Deut. 17:2–7 in the Bible or sūra 2:217 in the Qur’ān.<sup>37</sup> In Deuteronomy transgression of certain covenantal obligations is treated as a violation of religious identity, such that the person can no longer remain a legitimate part of the covenant community. That person is perceived as deviant and hence is stigmatized, sometimes with violence as a result.<sup>38</sup> Yet this is not a text that is intended merely as a form of social or cultural exclusion, since in the immediate context the passage speaks about impartiality in judgement (Deut. 16:18–20) and about the inclusive participation of family, servants, and strangers in the Feast of Booths (Deut. 16:13–15). Here ethnic identity and socioeconomic status are explicitly named as differences to include within the community of faith. Only transgression of specific covenant obligations may lead to exclusion, even of the native, freeborn Israelite. The reason for exclusion is strongly focused on certain

37 For a discussion of Qur’ānic texts, see Taha J. Alalwani, ‘The Qur’ānic Description of Apostasy’, in *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*, trans. Nancy Roberts (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011), 25–41 (p. 25–27).

38 For an overview of the exegetical discussion, see Chapter 5 in this volume by Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk, as well as Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9*, vol. 6A of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 365–70, e-book.

religious practices as they shape Israel's identity, while the reasoning is otherwise inclusive, based on a principle of equality.<sup>39</sup>

Even though the religious dimension is primary in these and other 'exclusive' sacred texts, the social complexity of apostasy remains. These dimensions can be distinguished in the texts, but they are difficult to separate, primarily because they regulated a society that was not highly differentiated. In the historical and cultural context of ancient Israel, a largely agrarian society with life centred in villages, religious, ethnic, and social identities overlapped significantly, which implies that leaving or disidentifying with a particular religious community also implied a social and ethnic breach.<sup>40</sup> This is what a text like Deuteronomy 17 seems to suggest. Yet, in this unfragmented context, socioeconomic and ethnic differences coexisted in relatively close quarters so that equality and inclusion remain important for normal civic functioning.

In our liquid, postmodern age, life is highly differentiated, even fragmented.<sup>41</sup> Most people are involved in various social networks that hardly overlap in their usual day-to-day functioning. The religious aspect of one's personal identity is not nearly as integrated in all daily relationships as it might have been in the times of ancient Israel or in the time of Jesus and the apostles. Thus, most people have meaningful relationships with others with whom they do not share a religious identity. To be excluded or exclude oneself from a religious group does not necessarily involve a breach of relationship in the many other spheres of life; indeed, such relationships may well continue without interruption even if a breach like apostasy takes place in the religious sphere.

Social identity theory has reflected on this dynamic in its theory about social mobility.<sup>42</sup> A key concept is the permeability of social boundaries: to what extent can social barriers be navigated and crossed? Beliefs in *social mobility* imply the confidence that one can easily move between groups to maintain one's social engagements, coupled with the belief that

39 For discussion, see Mark Glanville, 'The Gēr (Stranger) in Deuteronomy: Family for the Displaced', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 3 (2018): 599–623; Ehrhard S. Gerstenberger, 'Sensitivity towards Outsiders in Old Testament Theologies', in *Sensitivity Towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth, and Christopher M. Hays, WUNT vol. 346 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 27–40.

40 Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996), 81–107.

41 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

42 Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 23–25.

boundaries are flexible and permeable. Beliefs in *social change* imply the realization that individual enhancement is unlikely because of inflexible social arrangements and closed group boundaries. The only possibility is to act as a group to improve one's lot, for instance by joining the union to secure certain work privileges.

These beliefs lead to three strategies for self-enhancement.<sup>43</sup> The first is *personal mobility*, where a belief in social mobility, linked with the realization that one's ingroup has relatively low social status, leads an individual to switch group membership to a group with higher social status. However, when there is a realization of low ingroup status, linked with a belief in social change that perceives social boundaries as impermeable, individual enhancement is not possible. *Social creativity* then refers to situations of social stability where groups attempt to improve their lot by creatively highlighting their own value in new ways ('we are small, but with close relationships'). *Social competition* refers to situations of social instability, where groups might compete for resources or social status in order to gain status and influence in certain contexts.

In differentiated, individualized societies, processes of social mobility influence the way one thinks of identity and crossovers, and thus also of apostasy. When religious affiliation represents only one of many spheres of life, and when social boundaries are highly permeable (cf. the discourse about liquid society), it is easy to change adherence or leave one's religious affiliation altogether without seriously impacting the many other social identities that shape one's social life. Even in situations where religious affiliation is experienced as the dominant or most significant form of identity, such changes are possible. In less differentiated and more collectively oriented societies, such changes are more difficult because social identities have more overlap and because boundaries are not highly permeable. In addition, in many Muslim majority societies, religious and political powers often collaborate to solidify religious boundaries, making them appear to be nearly impermeable. In this socio-religious construction, the costs of identity crossovers are heightened, deterring socio-religious mobility. Evidently, the concept of apostasy functions quite differently in these contexts: although the theological definition might continue unchanged, its social relevance and impact vary greatly. In an individualized and more open society, apostasy becomes mainly (or merely) a matter of religious preference, with few sanctions or little damage in case of identity switch; in a more collective and less mobile society, such an identity switch can be

43 Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, 25–27.

very costly, even resulting in violence and death – which in turn leads to alternative behaviours to express one's religious convictions.

It is clear that sacred texts concerning apostasy play a different role in these various contexts as well. In societies with relatively impermeable social boundaries (often collectivist in orientation) and with religious and political powers that cooperate to heighten the cost of religious identity transfers, these texts may become instruments to mark these boundaries and to stigmatize those perceived as deviant. In societies marked by social mobility and personal autonomy (often individualist or dyadic in orientation), these texts seem to have little impact on one's religious affiliations and even less relevance for other social relationships and identities.

Connecting the above arguments, it seems that in more collective societies, religious and political leaders play a significant role as prototypical group members in shaping the inclusion and exclusion of religious adherents. Religious (and other social) identities are experienced as relatively stable with religious leaders serving as guardians of identity and tradition. They represent and embody faithfulness to that tradition by their own practices and proclamation and monitor the faithfulness of those also claiming allegiance to the faith community – which at times may be a cover for maintaining the leader's own power and position.<sup>44</sup> However, in 'open' societies individuals make their own choice in participating or not when including or excluding themselves in certain religious groups. Leaders still have an important role, but more often in enabling community members to navigate the complex issues of postmodern life as they desire to stay meaningfully connected with their tradition which now includes a diversity of religious experiences and faith practices.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Clearly, social identity is a significant concept that allows for a more fine-tuned analysis of the features of inclusive and exclusive religious claims,

44 Dina V. Krasikova, Stephen G. Green, and James M. LeBreton, 'Destructive Leadership: A Theoretical Review, Integration, and Future Research Agenda', *Journal of Management* 39, no. 5 (2013): 1308–38.

45 Jack Barentsen, Volker Kessler, and Steven van den Heuvel, eds., *Increasing Diversity: Loss of Control or Adaptive Identity Construction*, Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics, vol. 5 (Leuven: Peeters, 2018); Jack Barentsen, Steven van den Heuvel, and Peirong Lin, eds., *The End of Leadership? Leadership and Authority at Crossroads*, Christian Perspectives on Leadership and Social Ethics, vol. 4 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).



both by adherents and by their leaders. In much of modern life, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are highly complex. People may feel included in some groups in some spheres of life but excluded in other groups in other spheres of life. However, inclusion and exclusion may also operate in one's sense of belonging to one particular community (of faith), feeling more included along some dimensions and less included along other dimensions.

Furthermore, it can be observed in Western societies that value individual freedom above all else – freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and so forth – that public interaction and discourse favour a broad inclusive approach so that inclusion and exclusion also become highly individualized. Instead of leaders including and excluding individuals in a public and collective manner, people will include or exclude themselves on the basis of their own perceptions of how well they do and do not fit with the ingroup prototype. These are not absolute evaluations (someone fits a 100 percent or does not fit at all) but always gradual along various dimensions, so that, in the end, an overall assessment of fit by oneself leads to a sense of belonging or leaving. However, in more collectivist societies, and in those with closed identity boundaries (whether socially, culturally, and/or politically reinforced), individuals have little choice about belonging or leaving. The cost of leaving is often very high, so individuals attempt to fit the official ingroup prototype as best as possible, at least in ways that are publicly observable even if privately they would prefer to associate and identify differently. Different strategies of social identification then apply.

Two caveats should be mentioned. First, social identity theory is part of a multidisciplinary field of study, with approaches from social psychology,<sup>46</sup> sociology,<sup>47</sup> leadership,<sup>48</sup> biblical studies,<sup>49</sup> and studies on identity in the digital age.<sup>50</sup> Within these fields, social identity theory is one helpful tool to interpret group-oriented interaction, supplementing other methodologies,

46 Jenkins, *Social Identity*; Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell, eds., *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

47 Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*.

48 Haslam, Reicher, and Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership*; Niklas K. Steffens, Katie A. Munt, Daan Van Knippenberg, Michael Platow, and S. Alexander Haslam, 'Advancing the Social Identity Theory of Leadership: A Meta-Analytic Review of Leader Group Prototypicality', *Organizational Psychology Review* 11, no. 1 (2020): 35–72.

49 Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership*; J. Brian Tucker and A. Baker Coleman, *Handbook on Social Identity and the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

50 Elliott, *Identity Troubles: An Introduction*; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

such as theological methods.<sup>51</sup> Second, social identity theory has been developed in Western individualist societies but has also been tested in more collectivist societies,<sup>52</sup> so there is reason to assume that it also applies in the current discussion of apostasy in societies that vary significantly along the individualist–collectivist continuum.

It is my hope that the social identity perspective presented in this study on the question of apostasy provides insights into the intricate dynamics of religious inclusion and exclusion that will complement the language and concepts of the usual theological discourse.

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<sup>51</sup> See also Anthony Elliott, *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, *Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Velina Topalova, 'Individualism/Collectivism and Social Identity', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 53–64.



## 5 Deuteronomy 17:2–7 within the Context of Tanakh

*Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk*

### Abstract

According to Deuteronomy 17, leaving your religion is punishable by death. The command is meant to draw a line as a safeguard against apostasy, as that would be disastrous for the whole community. In the history of both Jewish and Christian interpretation, we do not find indications that this law was much implemented. Jewish tradition added so many criteria that it became almost impossible to carry out the death penalty. Therefore, Deuteronomy 17:2–7 does not have the last word when it comes to exclusion or inclusion in Tanakh. It should be read together with other texts with a different approach to this theme.

**Keywords:** apostasy, idolatry, death penalty, Deuteronomy, reception history, rabbinic texts

The project takes its starting point in the text of Deuteronomy 17, in which, it seems, ‘conversion to another religion’, or apostasy, is punishable by death. Before relating Deuteronomy 17 to the topic of exclusion and inclusion in our modern context, it is important to establish the meaning of the text and its place within Tanakh and within biblical theology. We will demonstrate that taking this text as a starting point is useful, but that this certainly does not imply that it can be regarded as characteristic of a biblical view on exclusion and inclusion.

## Exegesis

The pericope Deuteronomy 17:2–7 is part of a section with stipulations concerning public offices.<sup>1</sup> It starts in 16:18 with a series of commandments about the appointment of judges and how judgement is exercised. After rules about cultic practices (16:21–17:1) and the exclusive worship of YHWH (17:2–7), this series is continued in 17:8ff, with rules about the supreme court (17:8–13) and rules for the future king (17:14–20), the priests (18:1–8), and the prophets (18:9–22). We should keep this context, exercising judgement, in mind. It puts the required integrity of the witnesses in 17:6 in line with the required quality of leadership.

Within this section, the delimitation of our pericope about apostasy is clearly defined: it is enclosed by two uses of *qirb<sup>e</sup>cha*, ‘your midst’, in verse 2 with the preposition *b<sup>e</sup>*, ‘in’, and in verse 7 with *min*, ‘away from’. This accolade also makes clear what is going on: ‘in your midst’, in Israel, certain behaviour is not acceptable; it has to be exterminated and removed. That means: a death sentence for anyone who would act like this.

This unacceptable behaviour is described as idolatry, or more precisely, worshipping other gods. In this application of the command in Exodus 22:20 (Hebr. 22:19): ‘Whoever sacrifices to any god other than YHWH must be banned’. The celestial bodies, sun, moon, and stars are mentioned particularly. The prohibition on idolatry is deeply rooted in the religion of Israel; it is found in the Decalogue, in the first and/or second<sup>2</sup> commandment that forbids the making and worshipping of idols in any form, including ‘anything that is in heaven above’ (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). This apparently precludes the adoration of sun, moon, and stars, but this is only explicitly stated in Deuteronomy 4:19:

And when<sup>3</sup> you look up to the heavens  
and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven,

1 In modern research there is much discussion about the relation with similar commandments about apostasy in Deuteronomy 13. Many scholars assume that 17:2–7 originally belongs to that context. The original sequence would have been 12:29–13:1; 16:21–17:7; 13:2–19. See the overview and evaluation of the discussion by Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 98–110. Levinson explains the present sequence of legal topoi in chapter 17 as due to ‘the necessity of transforming judicial procedures as a consequence of cultic centralization’ (110). See also Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 248–49.

2 There is discussion on the delimitation and numbering of the Ten Commandments, which is not within the scope of this chapter. See, e.g. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus, Volume 3, Exodus 20–40*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 3–5.

3 The grammatical construction with *pen*, ‘lest’, is actually somewhat more complicated; it depends on Deut. 4:15: ‘[When YHWH revealed himself in fire,] you did not see any form ..., lest

do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them,  
things that YHWH your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere  
under heaven.

The last sentence is intriguing. It seems to indicate that YHWH condones worship of other gods as long as it is practised by foreigners. A similar idea seems to be expressed in Deuteronomy 29:25 (English translation v. 26), condemning Israel for serving 'gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them'. What is at stake here is that *within Israel, within the covenant*, there can be no place for idolatry. Outside Israel it is a different story.

So indeed, the evil in Deuteronomy 17:2 is first defined by 'transgressing his (God's) covenant'. Also, the strong expression *tô'ēbâ* is used (17:4), a term the book of Deuteronomy often uses to indicate a variety of practices, cultic and ethical, that can have no place in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The rest of the pericope is concerned with due process. A thorough inquiry is necessary to establish the guilt of the perpetrator. The minimum of two witnesses, generally stated in Deuteronomy 19:15, is mentioned here, with the same addition that even a third witness is desirable to avoid any false accusation. The witnesses are required to start the execution themselves, to make them even more responsible for the verdict that is the result of their testimony. The suggestion is clearly that the witnesses should think twice before they 'be the first to throw a stone', as Jesus cleverly uses in a gospel tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Essential is the expression *ba'ar hara' miqqirb<sup>e</sup>cha* in verse 7, which concludes the pericope, correctly translated in the NRSV as: 'So you shall purge the evil from your midst'.<sup>6</sup> This expression is found only in Deuteronomy, in a small number of texts, concerning different persons or situations:

Deut.	13:6	prophet or dreamer who advocates idolatry
Deut.	17:7	apostasy
Deut.	17:12	disobedience towards priest or judge
Deut.	19:19	false accusation of a capital offence

you should not be tempted to worship anything you see in the heavens.' For our purpose, this is not of great concern.

4 H.-D. Preuss, 'tô'ēbâ', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), vol. XV, 591–604, esp. 595–96: 17 times in Deuteronomy; *tô'ēbâ* is not a cultic term but connected with the concept of the people of God and the uniqueness of YHWH.

5 Preserved in John 7:53–8:11, see especially 8:7.

6 The Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (2004 and 2021) does not have the right emphasis: 'in de kiem smoren', 'nip in the bud', takes the expression figuratively, but it is meant literally with regard to removing the evil from society.

Deut.	21:21	rebellious son
Deut.	22:22-24	adultery, virgin not crying for help
Deut.	24:7	stealing an Israelite man, making him a slave

Discerning a central theme in this list is not as simple as we would like. The texts in Deuteronomy 13:6 and 17:7 are closely connected by the transgression of the first commandment, 17:12 and 19:19 describe unacceptable sins against the fundamentals of the judicial system, and 24:7 is easily recognized as an act destroying human dignity.<sup>7</sup>

The verb *ba'ar*, 'to purge', makes clear that removing these forms of evil from society is the first intention of this rule. The pedagogic intent is sometimes obvious (Deut. 19:20 and 21:21, 'And the rest shall hear and fear'), but purification remains the central theme.

## Historical and Biblical Theological Setting

It has become clear that the idea of 'monotheistic' Israel is not a historical fact but a narrative construct.<sup>8</sup> In reality, for a long time the biblical Israel has not been as 'monotheistic' as, for example, the writers of the Deuteronomistic history would have liked. On some occasions a new king had to purge the Jerusalem temple from objects belonging to other cults (2 Kgs 23:4; 2 Chron. 29:16). It took a long time before the 'YHWH-alone-movement' that shaped the characteristic biblical faith finally won and their views were accepted as normative. Regardless of whether we situate the book of Deuteronomy before the Babylonian exile, in the time of king Josiah, or after the exile in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, the book apparently testifies to this battle. In our opinion, a text like Deuteronomy 17:2-7 is meant to draw a line as a safeguard against apostasy, as that would be disastrous for the community as a whole.

For twenty-first-century readers, Deuteronomy 17:2-7 could easily be mistaken as a text about conversion, 'changing your religion'. In our opinion, that is not exactly what is at stake here. The concept of religion as a conviction, a set of truths, values, and guidelines for worship and behaviour that

7 Deut. 22 and certainly 21 are more difficult to understand as capital offences, but that is less relevant for this paper. Christensen has a somewhat different list of cases of capital offences in Deut. 12 through 26 and combines seven texts to form a 'menorah pattern': three concerning the first commandments on monotheism, three concerning the 'second table of the Law' on ethical matters. Interestingly, our text, 17:2-7, is the central one. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21:9, Revised*, WBC vol. 6A (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 367.

8 Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other God: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, JSOTSup 241 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997); Thomas Römer, 'Le problème du monothéisme biblique', *Revue Biblique* 124 (2017): 12-25.

one freely chooses from multiple possibilities, is a modern one. It is perhaps valid from the Hellenistic period and onwards, but in history it took a very long time before the individual was granted the right to choose their own faith – and even now that is by no means guaranteed. In the European Reformation of the sixteenth century, for example, conversion meant that the ruler of a region changed its adherence from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism of any kind, or vice versa; the best option for anyone disagreeing was to leave and find a place to live with people of similar conviction.

In antiquity much more than in our times, apart from some notable exceptions, religion was a collective choice or not even a choice. Whoever was born in Israel was a member of the covenant and responsible for upholding the rules of the covenant. Anyone transgressing fundamental rules of the covenant could not remain a member of the group.<sup>9</sup>

## Reception History

In the history of interpretation, we do not find indications that this law was much implemented. We do not know of any examples of executions of transgressors of this law in the Second Temple period. The Sanhedrin lost the judicial power to carry out the death penalty in the Roman period. When we look at the role of this and related texts in rabbinic literature, it can be noted in general that in capital cases, so many criteria were added that it is hardly conceivable that bringing this law into practice was seriously considered. This concerns both the judges and the witnesses. In *Mishnah Sanhedrin* we read that whereas non-capital cases are decided by three judges, capital cases are decided by twenty-three judges (1:1); that in capital cases a judge who has argued in favour of acquittal may not reconsider this decision in favour of conviction, while a judge who has argued in favour of conviction is allowed to change his verdict in favour of acquittal (4:1); that in capital cases the verdict may not be reached the same day but only the following day (4:1); that for a conviction in a capital case, there needs to be a majority of at least two judges (5:5).<sup>10</sup> Only witnesses of blameless behaviour were

9 See Mark A. Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy*, Ancient Israel and its Literature 33 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 17–20, for the concepts of collective identity and mutual responsibility in Deuteronomy, concepts that are especially difficult to grasp for Western-enculturated readers.

10 Lieve Teugels, “Whoever Saves a Soul Saves an Entire World” – *Pikuah Nefesh* in Rabbinic Literature’, in *Religion and Illness*, ed. Annette Weissenrieder (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 235–59, esp. 238.



accepted. A witness who did not fully agree with the religious dogmas or who was known, for instance, as a gambler, was excluded.

With regard to the witnesses, it is interesting to note that the famous saying ‘whoever saves a soul saves an entire world’ has its original place exactly within this particular framework.<sup>11</sup> It is worth quoting the entire passage from the Mishnah and Talmud:

How were the witnesses inspired with awe? Witnesses in capital charges were brought in and intimidated [thus]: Perhaps what ye say is based only on conjecture, or hearsay, or is evidence from the mouth of another witness, or even from the mouth of a trustworthy person. Perhaps ye are unaware that ultimately we shall scrutinize your evidence by cross examination and inquiry? Know then that capital cases are not like monetary cases. In civil suits, one can make monetary restitution and thereby effect his atonement; but in capital cases he is held responsible for his blood [i.e. the accused’s] and the blood of his [potential] descendants until the end of time, for thus we find in the case of Cain, who killed his brother, that it is written: the bloods of thy brother cry unto me. Not the blood of thy brother, but the bloods of thy brother, is said – i.e., his blood and the blood of his [potential] descendants. For this reason was man created alone, to teach thee that whosoever destroys a single soul of Israel, Scripture imputes [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul of Israel, Scripture ascribes [merit] to him as though he had preserved a complete world. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a)<sup>12</sup>

Whereas the saying is usually rendered as saving ‘a single soul’, the original text speaks of ‘a single soul of Israel’. This brings us to an unexpected case of inclusion versus exclusion. Originally the very humane saying about the significance of saving any person seems to have been reduced to saving someone of your own people. Already within the rabbinic tradition, this was experienced as problematic, as can be derived from the fact that in the Soncino edition (used above), it is indicated that ‘of Israel’ is absent in some texts.

In the history of the Christian church, especially in the time of the Reformation and Contra-Reformation, it is not difficult to give many examples

11 Cf. Teugels, ‘Whoever Saves a Soul’, 235–39.

12 Translation taken from the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, Vol. Sanhedrin*, ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1969).

of people being executed because of assumed apostasy. As a rule, those in power did not feel the need to base the right to carry out the death penalty on biblical texts other than, for instance, Romans 13. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 17, Calvin<sup>13</sup> remarks that this text shows that no difference is made between apostasy and idolatry: ‘it is accounted before God no less weighty a sin to violate His worship by gross and impure superstitions, than openly and professedly to fall away from religion altogether.’ The fact that verse 2 explicitly mentions both man and woman indicates, according to Calvin, ‘that although the weakness of the female sex may extenuate their guilt, yet must they not be pardoned in such a case as this, where God’s worship is directly violated’.<sup>14</sup> According to Calvin, it should also be noted, however, that God is not only rigid in his punishment but also asks for ‘diligent inquiry’. The crime should be punished only if proved by sure testimony. Calvin sees the command in verse 7 that the witness should be the first to throw a stone as ‘an excellent remedy for the repression of light accusations’. Although stoning is a horrible kind of punishment, God seems to have chosen it exactly because it requires the use of many hands. Turning bystanders into executioners of the penalty makes them feel more responsible and thus more critical regarding the quality of the arguments used. This point is also emphasized in modern commentaries, especially by Mark Biddle, who convincingly illustrates this point by relating it to modern accounts of a judge responsible for a death sentence and a lawyer witnessing the execution of a client.<sup>15</sup>

In a lecture on Deuteronomy 17:1–7, Luther<sup>16</sup> makes a remarkable distinction between sinning against faith and the word and sinning against love. With regard to the former, there is no room for lapse, because with this, one

13 Texts quoted in translation from ‘Calvin’s Commentary on the Bible’, *StudyLight*, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/cal/deuteronomy-17.html>, 1840–57.

14 This can be compared to the remark by Nahmanides in his comments on verse 2: ‘Women are flighty and therefore easily induced to idolatry by various tricks. Such were the worshipers of the Queen of Heaven in Jeremiah 44. We find similarly that “a man or a woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit shall be put to death” (Lev. 20:27), and note also the command “You shall not tolerate a sorceress” (Exod. 22:17): these things are more common among women.’ Quotation taken from *The Commentators’ Bible: The Rubin JPS Miqra’ot Gedolot: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 116.

15 Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2003), 282–85.

16 Martin Luther, *Auslegung des Alten Testaments: Predigten über das erste Buch Mosis und Auslegungen über die folgenden biblischen Bücher bis zu den Psalmen. Schriften*, Weimarer Ausgabe 14 (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1895, repr. 1966), 664–73, esp. 669, l. 13–20.

loses God together with his word. When this is lost, everything is lost. The latter concerns something which leaves God and his word unaffected. It can be redeemed. Love endures everything: if I am not perfect in loving my fellow human being, they are asked to endure my lapse in love. With faith things are different: the word should always be pure. Faith cannot be partially right and partially wrong; faith can only be weaker or stronger. Only a pure or reliable doctrine can evoke a comforting faith. The teachings should remain healthy as the right goal in life. Therefore, Luther states, Moses, who is the most kind-hearted man on earth, must be strict in this matter, just as he could show no mercy to the three thousand men killed because of the sin with the golden calf, having sinned against the word, the light and leader of life.

Texts like Deuteronomy 17:2–7 do not belong to the popular readings from the pulpit. You will not find it in lectionaries. Only those who commit themselves to a *lectio continua* will be forced to find a meaning for today. Most of them will probably focus on the reference to two or three witnesses and the importance of giving the accused a fair trial. It is sometimes related to Matthew 18:16, to Jesus's statement that a case is concluded on the testimony of two or three witnesses, although the direct link is to another verse in the book of Deuteronomy (19:15).<sup>17</sup> Tertullian relates it to the two angels at the empty tomb (Luke 24:4) as witnesses of the resurrection (*Adv. Marc.* 4.43.2).

Others follow the line of Luther, indicating that at some point there is no more room for mercy or compromise. The popular Dutch preacher Tom Naastepad explains that Deuteronomy 16:18–17:7 is all about justice. He places this against religion, which is only a way of maintaining the status quo and superficially filling the religious needs. Here the faith of Israel is diametrically opposed to the Canaanite religion, as life against death. He even states that those who do not want to belong to Israel have declared themselves as dead. Stoning them to death shows what they already have become.<sup>18</sup> In a moderate version, this view can be found in the commentary by Duane L. Christensen. As was mentioned before, he is not at all upset by the idea of capital punishment for apostasy. His explanation simply states, 'Important lessons may be taken from this law in terms of the responsibility

17 See on the topic of 'no single testimony' in the Second Temple period and in the New Testament, Sarah J. K. Pearce, *The Words of Moses: Studies in the Reception of Deuteronomy in the Second Temple Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 145–239.

18 'Hij wil geen zoon van Israël meer zijn, geen dochter in Israël. Dan zal ook aan hen geschieden wat ze willen: ze zullen tot buiten de poorten worden gebracht. En ze zullen worden gestenigd. Ze hebben zichzelf doodverklaard, nu zal dat dan ook in hun steniging openbaar worden.' Th. J. M. Naastepad, *Van horen zeggen: Uitleg van het boek Deuteronomium* (Baarn: Ten Have, 2001), 185.

we have to keep the church pure.”<sup>19</sup> Completely ignoring the violent content of the pericope, he immediately jumps to the strong resemblance he observes between the procedure in Deuteronomy (thorough investigation, two or three witnesses, etc.) and the ecclesiastical discipline process described in Matthew 18:15–17. It is taken for granted that the latter (only) ends in the expulsion of a member from the community while the first ends in their death, with only a bitter remark about church discipline that is, in practice, as irreversible as the death penalty.

A completely different view is put forward by Eben Scheffler, who mentions the capital punishments as the second of ten forms of violence in the book of Deuteronomy and vividly describes the cruelty of the act.<sup>20</sup> Both Christensen and Scheffler have absolutely no intention of implementing the instructions of Deuteronomy in modern society, but the way they arrive at this conclusion differs enormously. Christensen stands for a tradition in which the harsh instructions of the text are seen as historical facts, but the meaning for now is completely determined by taking the text metaphorically: no stoning but (just) excommunication (which, anyway, can be harsh enough). Scheffler explicitly refuses this kind of spiritualizing of the biblical text. He insists that the text should be taken seriously, including all its negative aspects. But in the end, he also must find a way to accommodate the text to our perception. A hint is found in a footnote: ‘In Maimonides’s view the basic meaning of the text is not denied, but cannot in a hermeneutical sense be followed as it stands. It therefore represents a view much more in line with what we attempt to advocate in this contribution.’<sup>21</sup>

## Exclusion and Inclusion within Tanakh

It is helpful and also necessary to view the text in its direct context within Deuteronomy 16–18 and within the broader context of the Hebrew Bible. Within Deuteronomy 16–18 the emphasis is on righteous leadership, especially the work of judges. Besides impartial judges, one needs reliable witnesses and regulations to avoid the biased testimony of only one witness harming the case of the accused. Within the Hebrew Bible it can be noticed that there are different voices: alongside exclusion there is also the promotion

19 Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9*, 370.

20 Eben Scheffler, ‘Reflecting on (Non-)Violence in the Book of Deuteronomy in (Old Testament) Canonical Context’, *Old Testament Essays* 27, no. 2 (2014): 579–96, esp. 585–86.

21 Scheffler, ‘Reflecting on (Non-)Violence’, 585, n. 26.

of inclusion. The necessity of safeguarding one's identity in a specific situation should not be underestimated, nor should it be undervalued. In his clear summary of the different views on outsiders in the Hebrew Bible, Erhard Gerstenberger distinguishes between the situations of the family/clan, sedentary groups, tribes, monarchies, and parochial organizations. It shows how '[t]he diverse profiles of the "other" can be traced back to social configurations in real life'.<sup>22</sup> In each of these configurations, outsiders played specific and also often changing roles.

In the Hebrew Bible, we also find different terms for 'stranger', and this coincides with the way they are included or excluded. The most common word is *ger*, indicating the stranger who is accepted within the Israelite community and who themselves also accepts the Israelite laws. Deuteronomy 31:12 states that these strangers are summoned together with the Israelites to hear the Torah and obey its commands. It is only one of many texts in the book of Deuteronomy indicating that the *ger* is adopted as kindred.<sup>23</sup> Next to the *ger* we find the *toshab*, which usually denotes the Canaanites who stayed in the land and lived alongside the Israelites. They were also accepted as part of the not ideal but hard to change reality. They were excluded, however, from cultic ceremonies like *Pesah* (Exod. 12:45). The 'real' foreigners were those who were called *nochri*. Deuteronomy 14:21 distinguishes the *nochri* from the *ger* as someone to whom you could sell forbidden meat (which, in contrast, should be given to a *ger*). And whereas it was forbidden to take interest from your brother, you were allowed to take it from a *nochri* (Deut. 23:20). It is also the designation of the 'foreign' women who must be sent away in the story in Ezra 10, safeguarding the identity of the Jewish people.<sup>24</sup> Even worse are the strangers who are called *zar*. They are excluded from the meal celebrating the reconciliation with YHWH (Exod. 29:33). It is the *zar* who takes advantage of your misery (Isa. 1:7) or who is the strange woman a father warns his son against (Prov. 2:16).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are witnesses to a theology that is determined by fear. With the events of the exile not too long behind them, the theological conclusion in these books is clear: We narrowly escaped

22 Erhard S. Gerstenberger, 'Sensitivity towards Outsiders in Old Testament Theologies', in *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth, and Christopher M. Hays (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 7–40 (p. 40).

23 Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger*, passim.

24 It is entirely possible that these women are 'foreign' only from the strict point of view of Ezra and his companions. Declaring opponents 'foreigners' according to their provenance (cf. Ezr. 4:2; 2 Kgs 17:24–40) is a strategy that works, until today, in a society tilting towards xenophobia.

annihilation. Only the grace of YHWH saved us from being wiped out completely, but new transgressions are a direct threat for our society and have to be removed (e.g. Ezr. 9:1-15, Neh. 9).<sup>25</sup> Even in these late texts, this concept of collective responsibility for the future of the community is very much alive. We can presume that similar mechanisms were at play in the situation when Deuteronomy 17 was written.

When it comes to inclusion and exclusion, we note a large variety within Tanakh.<sup>26</sup> Apparently, the political situation differed, but also different stances may be found reflecting the different insights of the various biblical writers. In the book of Jonah, for example, a much more lenient view of the heathen (and hostile) city of Nineveh is found than in Nahum. In the story about the Israelite prophet Jonah failing his calling and trying to escape YHWH by sailing to the West instead of going to the East to Nineveh, the non-Israelite sailors are presented as doing the right thing: they pray to YHWH (Jon. 1:14). In the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman is presented as faithful to her mother-in-law and to YHWH. Many biblical texts warn against the danger of Moabites leading the Israelites astray, for instance, the Moabite women in Numbers 25. This specific Moabite woman, however, plays a special role as the great-grandmother of King David. It can also be noted that in the book of Genesis, there is a much more open and often even friendly relationship between Abraham and his descendants, on the one hand, and the Canaanites, on the other hand. In this connection one can also note the positive role of Jethro, the Midianite father-in-law of Moses.

A very interesting example of the changing roles of Israelites and foreigners when it comes to inclusion versus exclusion is found in the book Joshua. This book, with its very clear distinction between the chosen people of Israel and the Canaanites, who are only there to be replaced, is introduced by two stories that put this distinction into a new perspective. The first Canaanite who plays a role in this book is Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho. She appears to be a true believer in YHWH, and her testimony encourages the Israelites to go forward. When the conquest of the promised land is suddenly interrupted, this appears to be caused by the transgression of Achan, a member of the important tribe of Judah. He must be stoned to death with his wife and children, whereas Rahab and her family survive the destruction of Jericho.<sup>27</sup>

25 Cf. Joep Dubbink, 'Heksenjacht of non-conformisme? De crisis rondom de gemengde huwelijken (Ezra 9-10)', *Kerk en Theologie* 71 (2020): 6-19, esp. 11-12.

26 Cf. also Gerstenberger, 'Sensitivity towards Outsiders', 37.

27 Klaas Spronk, 'There is a Crack in Everything: Biblical Texts Questioning the Legitimation of Violence in the Name of the One God', *Exchange* 45 (2016): 130-40; esp. 137.

These stories cannot be regarded as an exception to the rule of Deuteronomy 17 that apostasy deserves the death penalty, because outsiders like Ruth and Rahab are only included after they showed themselves to be true followers of the god of Israel. The older situation of henotheism, in which it was accepted as normal that other peoples served other gods, is replaced in most texts in Tanakh by strict monotheism. Only in some texts do we still find some traces. A well-known example is found in Deuteronomy 32:8, where the text in the Septuagint and a Qumran scroll seems to suggest that YHWH as 'the Most High' divided the world among the different peoples, giving them their own gods. It is intriguing, as was indicated above, that a similar view may be found in Deuteronomy 4:19, assuming that YHWH had no problem with other people worshipping the sun and moon, as long as Israel refrained from it. Be this as it may, as Gerstenberger rightly concluded, 'the variety of images' warns against 'naïveté' which 'has often resulted in ignoring the specific historical and social backgrounds of the images. Even more problematic, the most radical versions of "otherness" have frequently been adopted as the only possible meaning for the concept. In other words, fundamentalist readers of the Bible to this day have justified the unmerciful exclusion of "outsiders" from the community of believers.'<sup>28</sup>

In line with these remarks, we conclude that in our opinion, Deuteronomy 17:2–7 does not have the last word when it comes to exclusion or inclusion in Tanakh. It should therefore also be handled with care when we want to base our discussion of this topic on biblical grounds. It has become clear that it is not just a text about conversion, but moreover, it is evident that it should be read together with other texts with a different approach to this and related themes.

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28 Gerstenberger, 'Sensitivity towards Outsiders', 39.

## 6 Otherness and Exile: Jesus's Attitude towards Apostates and Outsiders

*Henk Bakker*

### Abstract

This contribution explores to what extent Jesus's attitude towards apostates and outsiders could be described as lenient, strict, or somewhere in between. How did he position himself within the religious-cultural web of parties, splinter groups, and movements, and how did this materialize into idiosyncratic ways of approaching dilemmas regarding apostasy and assimilation? Who are the apostates according to Jesus, if any? Methodologically, the investigation looks primarily for narrative and propositions, structured in the literary device of the parable, to discern what purport and intentions the historical Jesus transmitted to his followers. Alongside Jesus's own Galilean tradition and style, particular attention is paid to the texts in which he expresses belief and despair, faithfulness and doom (hybridity versus exile).

**Keywords:** gospels, parables, Jesus, apostate, hybridity, exile

### Introduction

Scholarly opinion with respect to Jesus's profile vis-à-vis his contemporaries seem to be as multifarious as Jewish life itself in Jesus's day. Even so, vital unifying markers may be traced down to the life and times of Jesus, as leading voices in the Jesus research currently tend to suggest. So, portraying him as a Galilean type of 'saint' (*chasîd*), whose primary interest was in Jewish autonomy and faithfulness to ancient tradition, may actually come as close to reality as it was. According to leading Jewish scholars, Jesus should basically be understood within the conservative Palestinian settings in which he was raised (in particular the Northern Elijic settings). David



Flusser makes the acute observation that 'he is the only Jew of ancient times known to us who preached not only that people were on the threshold of time, but that the new age of salvation had already begun'.<sup>1</sup> Géza Vermes classifies Jesus as a *Wunderrebe* whose orientation was typically Galilean, namely Northern Palestinian, directed towards renewal of this life and rigorous conversion (*ṭ<sup>e</sup>shúbāh*).<sup>2</sup> Jesus's prophetic awareness evidently reflects Elijah-like reluctance towards royalty and organized ritualism, including the all-pervasive monopoly of the Jerusalem temple. It seems fairly logical that the northern provinces, by mere distance, were more dependent on local synagogues, rabbis, sages, prophets, and charismatic leaders than on the Jerusalem officials and elite.<sup>3</sup>

More or less restricted to the upper region, Jesus was more of a marginal Jew, without any particular status, wealth, or higher education, than an opinion leader. This urgent reality check characterizes John P. Meier's series on the historical Jesus and settles the issue about Jesus's elusive start and accessibility. According to Meier, the elusiveness regarding Jesus's identity remained throughout the years he proclaimed his message. Jesus simply cannot be outlined in a single phrase or Jewish category. He is 'not easily subsumed under one theological rubric or sociological model',<sup>4</sup> a denominator that has been used before.<sup>5</sup>

For Bart Ehrman, too, Jesus's message was Galilean, prophetic, but the difference with other prophets was, he maintains, that the Kingdom somehow was realized within the immediacy of his words and deeds.<sup>6</sup> However, for scholars like Tom Wright, Richard Bauckham, and James Dunn, it cannot be denied that this Galilean prophet and holy man was also identified as the embodiment of the Name of God, as the Son of God, albeit in an

1 David Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 80 (cf. p. 26).

2 Géza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 188–207 and Géza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 35–39.

3 Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 185.

4 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 2 – Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 354.

5 Cf. Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 13: 'Jesus: the man who fits no formula'; 14: 'Jesus' actions and words burst the bounds of all messianic expectations'; 22: 'he fits none of these formulas'; and 30: 'None of these categories fits him.' Charles F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 145: Jesus was 'too big for that category and burst out of it in startling ways'.

6 Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 267–331 and Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 112–28.

indirect and interpretive way. Wright depicts the communal process of sense-making as generating a shared awareness of 'inaugurated eschatology', Dunn uses the indication 'faith creating impact', and Bauckham uses the term 'eyewitness testimony' to refer to the same high Christology evolving from live engagements with Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## His Own Path

Nevertheless, despite this common ground as to Jesus's social-cultural background and the process of sense-making involved (which is essential for any reconstruction of Jesus's body of thought), there is no real consensus as to how disapproving or disqualifying Jesus was and to whom his criticisms were exactly addressed. For example, Meier does not situate Jesus as an opponent of the temple hierarchy, whereas Ehrman does. Flusser characterizes Jesus as a conservative reformer who, in some respects, reasons more precisely than the Pharisees, more in the manner of the Essenes, and in other respects he seems more lenient, defining his own path. Peter Tomson asserts that in pointing out his own path, Jesus's new 'way' (*dèrèkh*) is somewhat fresh, new, and powerful. Yet sometimes he seems to take sides with the Essenes, in particular with regard to the laws on divorce, and sometimes he seems to take sides with the Pharisees, as he exhibits a strict view on the fifth commandment, to 'honour your father and your mother' (Exod. 20:12).<sup>8</sup> With respect to sabbath observance, he turns out to be more lenient than the Pharisees, and regarding purity laws he adjudicates as one standing in between the Essenes and the Sadducees.

Part and parcel of any halachic attitude and discourse in Jesus's day was the practice of social distancing, which was fairly normal. Social distancing, for example in matters of purity, was an approved means to discipline offenders of religious law, and, if necessary, to ban them from exerting

7 Tom Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 57–58; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 5–11, 259–63; James Dunn, 'Remembering Jesus: How the Quest of the Historical Jesus Lost its Way', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., vol. 1, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 183–205; James Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Vol. 1: Jesus Remembered*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 173–254, 881–84 (p. 884).

8 Peter J. Tomson, *'Als dit uit de Hemel is ...' Jezus en de schrijvers van het Nieuwe Testament in hun verhouding tot het Jodendom*, 3rd ed. (Hilversum: B. Folkertsma Stichting voor Talmudica, 1997), 99–100.

their faith. The stance Jesus took in most cases of law-related social dispute was rather controversial, as I will show by looking mainly at his parables.

## Playful Confrontations

Parables have the advantage of employing a playful style while prompting tough messages.<sup>9</sup> In this respect the listeners are taken by the hand by story and in a way experience the message by imagination. Accordingly, narrative, moral proposition, and the pleasure of imagination go together effectively in the Jewish *māshal*, which enhances the opportunity for exemplification. While listening to Jesus's parables, the listener sees themselves playfully confronted with the moral proposition making up the heart of the story (*nimshal*).<sup>10</sup> The confrontation is acted out safely as an inner moral dialogue that makes the listener, almost taken by surprise, decide on the spot. Either they surrender to the moral imperative demonstrated by Jesus or evade it. Another option is just to walk away, unimpressed. In any case, strong parables arouse indignation, approval, disgust, happiness, and so on and lead up to moments of painstaking moral assessment. It seems as if such parables operate as speech-act, words instigating action, because they sharpen one's conscience like a stone sharpens a blade.

However, there is no consensus on what exactly constitutes a parable of Jesus. Neither is there any consensus on which parables could be traced to the *ipsissima verba Jesu*. Meier cuts the number down to four parables, the so-called 'happy few', by the criteria of (1) multiple attestation, (2) embarrassment, (3) discontinuity, (4) coherence, and (5) Jesus's rejection and execution.<sup>11</sup> These are the parable of the evil tenants (Matt. 21:33–46; Mark

9 Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990), par. 419–25, (p. 232).

10 Compare Richard A. Batey, 'Jesus and the Theatre', *New Testament Studies* 30, no. 4 (1984): 563–74 (p. 572): 'Even the style of Jesus' teachings exemplifies a unique dramatic quality.' In the gospels the Greek word, *parabolé* has a range of meanings. See John W. Sider, 'The Meaning of *Parabole* in the Usage of the Synoptic Evangelists', *Biblica*, 62, no. 4 (1981): 453–70 (p. 469).

11 See Regina A. Boisclair, 'Review of John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 5: *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables*', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2020): 518–20. Cf. Menahem Kister, 'Parables and Proverbs in the Jesus-Tradition and Rabbinic Literature', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41, no. 1 (2018): 5–28 (p. 24); Birger Gerhardsson, 'The Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels: A Comparison with the Narrative Meshalim in the Old Testament', *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 3 (1988): 339–63 (p. 362): 'I am inclined to take Matt. 13, 51–2 as a sign indicating that early Christianity felt itself entitled to formulate new narrative meshalim of the Kingdom (taken in a wide meaning), meshalim created in the spirit

12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19), the parable of the great supper (Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24), the parable of the talents/pounds (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27), and the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19).

## Identity in Hybridity

One may agree with Meier or disagree (as I do), but it is still evident from these parables that Jesus proclaimed a very critical message. Without any doubt, the parable of the evil tenants represents an exemplary specimen of Jesus's criticism of the temple aristocracy in his day, in particular the Markan version (Matthew and Luke differ from Mark in various details). Here Jesus defines himself as the final prophet in a long line of messengers from God, whose fate it is to die for the cause of God's property. In Mark, Jesus explicitly states the repetitive character of the sending of the servants: 'He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed' (Mark 12:5<sup>12</sup>). Finally, the tenants did not spare the only servant left – that is, the son whom the owner loved (*hena eichen, huion agapèton*). He sent him 'last of all' (*auton eschaton*, verse 6), thereby underscoring the eschatological significance of the son's visitation.

Apparently, Jesus was fully aware of the effect the narrative would have upon the hearers and in particular on 'the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders', who were actually there (Mark 11:27 NIV). The most precarious utterance in the narrative is captured in the rhetorical question and its obvious answer: 'What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others' (Mark 12:9 NIV). Of course, this reaction holds exactly what Jesus was looking for, because this is the *nimshal* popping up in the hearts of those who heard and imagined.

Unfortunately, the extended version of Matthew has often been taken as a punishment of the Jewish people as a nation, but this is not the case. Matthew declares, 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit' (Matt. 21:43 NIV) and indicates that the contract of the tenants with the vinedresser will be

of the master and according to the same lines as his own *meshalim*. Disciple-works, in other words.'

12 Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical references are from the NIV.

nullified and will be offered to a group of different tenants.<sup>13</sup> Jesus clearly marks off the boundaries of the Jewish people in his time, and he expects new leadership to take responsibility for the house of Israel. Consequentially, he excludes crooked leaders from their business in the house of God, which includes temple dignitaries and other elites. They match Ezekiel's warning that God will end their employment and give it to others.<sup>14</sup>

Even so, who are these 'others'? As a matter of fact, the anonymous 'others' may be the gentile people,<sup>15</sup> but exegetically it seems more tenable to argue inclusively and exclusively simultaneously. After all, almost every element in the story can be related to targumic exegesis and is to be dated before 70 CE. Thus, Jesus's contemporaries may have been well acquainted with such metaphors by listening to targumic expositions in the synagogue.<sup>16</sup> The pre-Markan story is now applied biographically by Jesus and leads the hearers to choose the landlord's side, which is his Father's side, and to reject the wickedness of the tenants. Consequently, the 'others' which make up the new branch of leaders consist of Jewish followers of Jesus, who form a remnant in Israel, and gentile followers of Jesus entering the porous fringes of the Jewish *ekklèsia*. New leadership in Israel is to be selected from this nucleus.

This tentative approach matches with Jesus's Galilean background, which is less Judea- and temple-oriented and more committed to (later) Isaianic prophecies, which transcend Judaeon borders.<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, Judean hierarchy tended to think in temple-centred terms. In order to maintain a monopoly, its monotheism was rather restrictive, not conversant with foreign people, nations, and religious systems. Galileans were regularly immersed in the widening outlook of (later) Isaiah, (later) Zachariah, and

13 Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 4 vols., Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament I.3, (Zürich: Vluyn, 1997), vol. 3, 220–221. According to Ernest van Eck, 'Realism and Method: The Parables of Jesus', *Neotestamentica* 51, no. 2 (2017): 163–84, the parable is highly realistic, leading up to the surprising turn in the story of the landowner deciding not (yet) to exercise his right to use force to defend his ownership (p. 173).

14 Ezek. 34:10, 23 (the name 'David' here represents collective identity).

15 See Kelly R. Iverson, 'Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in Narrative Perspective (Mark 12:1–12)', *Biblical Interpretation* 20, no. 3 (2012): 305–35.

16 Armand Puig i Tàrrach, 'Metaphorics, First Context and Jesus Tradition in the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard', *Biblische Notizen* 159 (2013): 75–120 and Johannes C. de Moor, 'The Targumic Background of Mark 12:1–12: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants', *JSJ* 29, no. 1 (1998): 63–80 (p. 79).

17 Compare Mark A. Chancey, 'How Jewish was Jesus' Galilee?', *Biblical Archeology Review* 33, no. 4 (2007): 42–50; Davidson Razafiarivony, 'Exclusion of the Blind and Lame from the Temple and the Indignation of the Religious Leaders in Matthew 21:12–15', *Journal of Biblical Theology* 1, no. 3 (2018): 93–113.

late Malachi. Their belief system can be typified as inclusive monotheism because this is what they witnessed 'in visio': throughout the world and the nations, yes, even in the darkest places and provinces, the light of God will start to shine. God's interest cannot be limited to one province, to one city, to one house of prayer.

Even though Jesus's intentions were inclusive, they were not all-inclusive. The parable of the wicked tenants demonstrates that, for Jesus, new identity is found in hybridity, because the 'others' are being included, whosoever they may be. In other words, for Jesus the realm of 'otherness' (alterity) is constitutive of hybridized identity and envisages another type of leadership and new communal identity. Nonetheless, not every alterity can establish hybridity with Jesus or with his disciples. Otherness may be enriching and beneficial and may truly add up to becoming better and deeper, as Jesus demonstrates in his community of convertive followers, but it can also be a place of captivity, estrangement, and desolation, as seems the case with the majority of Israel's leaders stirring up Jesus's opponents. Hence, Jesus's notion of 'hybridity' was not just a matter of mixed identity but of convictions crossing social borders, and in particular of conversion. Otherness means either completion or exile, and in Jesus's parables the hearers are invited to enter a narrative in which their imagination, by heart and intuition, will eventually predispose them to one or to the other, true converts to completion, and crooked leaders to exile.<sup>18</sup>

## Culture of Excuses

As a matter of fact, the parable of the great supper heads in the same direction with quite another narrative (Matt. 22:2–10 NIV; Luke 14:16–24 NIV). Although Matthew and Luke seem to tell the same story – supposedly the storyline is dependent on Q<sup>19</sup> – the exact wording in both versions diverge

18 See A.N. Williams, 'Assimilation and Otherness: The Theological Significance of *Négritude*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 3 (2009): 248–70; Angela Wong Wai-Ching, 'Identity in Hybridity: Ruth in the Genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17; Ruth 1–4)', *Theologies and Cultures* 6/2 (2009): 98–109. See also Lucy Taksa, Glen Powell, and Laknath Jayasinghe, 'Intersectionality, Social Identity Theory, and Explorations of Hybridity: A Critical Review of Diverse Approaches to Diversity', in *The Oxford Handbook of Diversity in Organizations*, ed. Regine Bendl, Inge Bleijenbergh, Elina Henttonen, and Albert J. Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 518–36 and Keri E Iyall Smith and Patricia Leavy, *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, *Studies in Critical Social Sciences* 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

19 Frans Neiryck, *Q-Synopsis. The Double Tradition Passages in Greek*, *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Auxilia* 13 (Leuven: Peeters, 1988), 52–53.

significantly. However, they do concur as to the preparations made by an important person (king/certain man) for a grand festivity (wedding banquet/great banquet), as to the sending of servants to the guests to announce that dinner is ready (twice/once), and as to the bitter disappointment when the guests invited do not show up, whereupon the host takes measures. The ramifications come close to the measures to be taken regarding apostasy (Deut. 17:2–7).

In Matthew, the king retaliates because some of his servants were mistreated and killed during the second mission to the guests. Subsequently, he orders his messengers to go to the street corners and invite ‘anyone’ they can find, ‘the bad as well as the good’ (*ponèrous te kai agathous*), so that the wedding hall is filled with guests. It is distinctive of Matthew to let his story conclude with the host asking one of the guests why he was not wearing wedding clothes and then have him tied up, hand and foot, and be thrown ‘outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (verses 11–13, Matthean ‘Sondergut’).

Luke, however, has only one mission to the listed guests and two missions to the unexpected guests. To be sure, the host gives the order to go out ‘quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’. Then one of the servants returns and reports, ‘Sir what you ordered has been done, but there is still room’, whereupon the host tells his servant to go out ‘to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in’ (verses 21–24).

Jesus’s message in sharing this parable is, again, to emphasize how often God has reached out to his people, in particular people in charge (tenants or listed guests), and how often his message (and messengers) has been rejected.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this parable is a storied narrative, therefore quite realistic, dealing with the many excuses and disappointments Jesus experienced and dealing with the coming wrath of God, which he expected. The ‘otherness’ here is manifested in the surprising new list of guests, namely ‘anyone’: that is, the bad and the good, the poor and the disabled, and all others who were compelled to come in. Those who had excused themselves, or worse, who had insulted the host and had started molesting the messengers (whose authority, as delegates, should be thought of as the

20 Matthew and Luke pay more attention to excuses than Mark; see also Matt. 8:19–22; Luke 9:57–62 (Q). In the parable of the children’s game, he takes a rather playful but piercing view; see Matt. 11:16–19; Luke 7:31–35 (Q). See Olof Linton, ‘The Parable of the Children’s Game: Baptist and Son of Man (Matt. 11:16–19 = Luke 7:31–35): A Synoptic Text-Critical, Structural and Exegetical Investigation’, *New Testament Studies* 22, no. 2 (1976): 159–79.

sender's<sup>21</sup>) demonstrated their utter estrangement from him even more. They end up in captivity, Jesus reveals, and will remain in exile.<sup>22</sup> Those who suffer most from the diaspora and current Roman suppression will be restored and healed in God's Kingdom, but those who look for excuses to remain where they are, seeking compromises in their luxurious and privileged positions, will finally be judged and be brought into deeper exile, which is the fate of the apostate.

Matthew and Luke (Q) both venture to denounce the evasive culture of excuses Jesus faced in Galilee, and later in Judea, and point at the ultimate consequences of this behaviour. Both gospels hammer out the painful reaction of Jesus that people from all directions, north and south and east and west, will take their places at the feast in God's kingdom, except for the 'sons of Israel' who were listed first. Those called 'first', will be the last, and those called 'last' will be the first. The 'first' becoming 'last' will not be welcomed by God. In fact, right at the door He will tell them, 'I don't know you' (*ouk oida humas // oudepote egnōn humas*), and He will have them thrown outside, 'into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.<sup>23</sup> So, Israelites who hide behind sheer excuses may end up becoming total strangers to God. Quite astoundingly, they become the 'others', whereas outsiders are invited to enter the banquet hall. Replacement is the fate of the apostate.

## Halachic Profile

A conspicuous element in the discussion on these parables is the observation that the parable of the great supper and other texts regarding excuses are preserved in Q, a source with halachic overtones. Sayings of Jesus were primarily preserved for halachic reasons (*logia* were considered normative) because the content was a response to prevailing opinions and convictions, be they Pharisaic or Sadducean or Zealotic or different. Hence, we confront the question of how the Q-parables (as extended sayings) pertain to halachic issues in Jesus's era. As stated above, Jesus's halachic attitude is hard to determine. His Galilean background and upbringing and his connection

21 See *mBerachot* 5,5, *Nedarim* 72B, and *Kiddushim* 41b.

22 See Douglas S. Mccomiskey, 'Exile and the Purpose of Jesus' Parables (Mark 4:10–12; Matt 13:10–17; Luke 8:9–10)', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 1 (2008): 59–85.

23 Luke 13:28–30 (25, 27 'I don't know you'); Matt. 8:11–12 (7:23; 25:12 'I don't know you'). Matthew elaborates on the theme of 'the first becoming last' and vice versa in the parable of the workers in the vineyard; see Diedrik A. Nelson, 'Matthew 20:1–16', *Interpretation* 29, no. 3 (1975): 288–92.



with John the Baptist make him into the prophet and teacher he is, with a convertive message directed towards some form of Galilean centrifugal and inclusive monotheism. The gospel is an urgent invitation to Jews and other nations and cultures to celebrate the grace and goodness of God. The Kingdom of God dawns on earth in the celebration of His salvific presence, which is imminent. So, this culture of excuses prevailing in the Galilean cities should be taken rhetorically, embedded within current Jewish discussions, and as an explanatory narrative for the mission beyond Jewish borders.

In terms of halachic instruction, Jesus teaches his followers to go and spread the invitation, and in doing that, to cross social and ethnic borders. Already John the Baptist, recognized by the evangelists as Jesus's forerunner, addressed tax-collectors, who were deemed apostates, soldiers, and others, and ever since, the tradition of Jesus has traversed manifold prevailing conventions. The extant gospels are replete with intricacies prone to prompting incidents. However, in the parable of the leaven, Jesus's instruction pictures the coming change as a piece of yeast<sup>24</sup> – because of its infectiousness a symbol of evil in Jewish literature<sup>25</sup> – ready to spread everywhere (like a good infection), deep into society, even in Galilee, among the little and the poor people, and it will flourish. Quite surprisingly, it will fill the ends of the earth, symbolized in the leaven hid (*enekrupsen*) in sixty pounds of flour, an amount filling at least one hundred mouths.<sup>26</sup>

In the parable of the talents/pounds (Q), the surprising expansion ('gain') is also a matter of discussion.<sup>27</sup> Jesus's instruction here is that the employees to whom a variety of bags of gold (as a loan) is entrusted should invest these for the benefit of themselves and their lord. However, investing money by definition implies running the risk of losing it altogether. Still, the point of the narrative appears to be that true stewardship is exerted in enabling spiritual benefit, notwithstanding the costs and risks. The parable is not about using one's personal talents, but about who should be committed to

24 Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20–21 (Q).

25 Cf. George Wesley Buchanan, *Jesus; The King and His Kingdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 213–14, 240–52 and C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Collins, 1961), 143–44. Cf. Mark 8:15.

26 See Peter Lampe, *New Testament Theology in a Secular World: A Constructivist Work in Philosophical Epistemology and Christian Apologetics* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 123–29; Ryan S. Schellenberg, 'Kingdom as Contaminant? The Role of Repertoire in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2009): 527–43 and Mark L Bailey, 'The Parable of the Leavening Process', *Biblia Sacra* 156 (1999): 61–71. See also Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 6th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 145–49.

27 Matt. 25:14–30, 13:12; Luke 19:12–27, 8:18–19 (Q).

creating opportunities for conversion (*t<sup>e</sup>shuvah*). Those in charge, but who do not want to run the risk, are opposed by Jesus and are called 'wicked servants' who are thrown 'outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.<sup>28</sup> They are being treated as apostates, as blasphemers.

Again, punishment is indicated as being delivered into exile and otherness, which from a Galilean perspective is within certain proximity. After all, the province of Galilee, the home of the tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, and Asher, borders directly onto the gentile districts of Phoenicia and Syria.<sup>29</sup>

## Into Exile

Jesus's attitude towards apostates and outsiders is forgiving with regard to inclusion, but if forgiveness is not an option, he may leave them to exile. Both forces are at work in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke) and in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew). In the first the youngest son assimilates himself to the world and moves voluntarily into exile, which comes close to apostasy and exclusion ('being cut off', *Ausstoßung*, Hebrew *q<sup>e</sup>tsatsah*<sup>30</sup>). However, when he finds his way back home with remorse, the father welcomes him wholeheartedly.

In the parable of the unmerciful servant, the story develops automatically from Jesus's halachic instruction regarding forgiveness, which turns out to be somewhat controversial. In the narrative Jesus introduces a man whose huge debt has graciously been pardoned by his boss but who, right after this act of forgiveness, seizes and chokes another debtor who owes him just a

28 Matt. 25:30; Luke 19:27. Cf. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 55–60. The Lukan version more or less resembles the story of king Archelaus ('But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me'). See also I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 700–709; Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew. Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 485–91; and Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 492–515.

29 Cf. Isa. 9:1, 'Galilee of the nations'.

30 *bKetuvot* 28b. See Lazarus Goldschmidt, trans., *Der Babylonische Talmud*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1996), vol. 5, 86–87. Cf. Basil S. Brown, 'The Great Apostasy in the Teaching of Jesus', *Australian Biblical Review* 10, no. 1 (1962): 14–20; Karl-Gustav Sandelin, 'The Jesus-Tradition and Idolatry', *New Testament Studies* 42/3 (1996): 412–20; and Paul Corby Finney, 'The Rabbi and the Coin Portrait (Mark 12:15b, 16): Rigorism Manqué', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 4 (1993): 629–44.

small sum of money.<sup>31</sup> The forgiven man is called back by his boss and is handed over to ‘the jailers to be tortured’. Jesus is lenient and patient in facilitating conversion, repentance, and forgiveness, but he sends people back to exile if they are hypocrites whose ambition it is to thrive in God’s mercy and do not treat others in the same merciful way. Matthew has captured this strong warning in Jesus’s halachic guidelines on backsliding brothers and sisters in the previous verses.<sup>32</sup>

So, exclusion, which is roughly equivalent to banishment (literally and/or spiritually), does not equal capital punishment on account of mortal sin. To be sure, it was almost impossible to sentence someone to death in rabbinic courts.<sup>33</sup> Jesus seems to endorse this policy and, if necessary, interferes.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the sanction of banishment/exile (*gālūt*) was widely administered, as the Romans did in their repressive policies and as the Pharisees were also authorized to enforce. Josephus remarks that when they were in power, during the first half of the first century BCE, they banished and brought back whomsoever they chose.<sup>35</sup> The gravity of the punishment was not only that the victim was exiled ‘to a place of evil waters’, so that their disciples who would come after them would ‘drink thereof and die’,<sup>36</sup> but that the victim was also banished from the presence of God. The person who lives ‘outside the Land [of Israel]’ is regarded ‘as if he is worshipping idols’, postulates the Talmud.<sup>37</sup>

31 Matt. 18:23-35 (M), however, compare Matt. 18:15, 21–22; Luke 17:3–4. The parable of ‘the unmerciful servant’ as it stands is a construction of several words (*logia*) and tales of Jesus. The end result was meant to serve the Matthean ‘school’.

32 Matt. 18:15–19.

33 *mMakkot* 7a. The death penalty should be left in the hands of God, so to speak; see *bSanhedrin* 37a–b, *bKetubot* 30a–b, Goldschmidt, *Der Babylonische Talmud*, vol. 5, 89–92.

34 See John 8:3–11, although textual evidence for the event is rather late and weak.

35 Flavius Josephus, *De bello Iudaico* 1.111: ‘the Pharisees...became at length the real administrators of the state, at liberty to banish and to recall, to loose and to bind, whom they would’, in H. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus: The Jewish War*, 9 vols., vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library 203 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 53, 55.

36 *Avot* 1:11, ‘Ye Sages, give heed to your words lest ye incur the penalty of exile and ye be exiled to a place of evil waters, and the disciples that come after you drink [of them] and die, and the name of heaven be profaned’, in Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 447. Cf. Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, 7 vols. (New York: Judaica Press, 1964), vol. 4., 493: ‘to a place of evil waters’ [*lim<sup>e</sup> qôm mayim hārā’im*], which Blackman, in a footnote, takes as pertaining to ‘Alexandria in Egypt where the Jews fostered Hellenistic Judaism and heresy’.

37 *bKetuvot*, 110b, in Goldschmidt, *Der Babylonische Talmud*, vol. 5, 358: ‘wenn jemand außerhalb des Landes wohnt, sei es ebenso, als würde er Götzen dienen’. Cf. 1 Sam. 26:20.

## **Conclusion**

Taking all this into account, Jesus's attitude towards apostates and outsiders, such as blasphemers, can be epitomized with the binary of otherness and exile. In his teaching and attitude, particularly in the parables, Jesus exhibits a typical Galilean orientation, which he deepens through unfolding his own halachic path. His criticism is mainly directed towards hypocrisy, in particular towards those whom he accuses of taking advantage of the system and God's patience and grace and of acting at the expense of poor and vulnerable people. In the coming age, which is imminent and in fact present in Jesus's words and deeds (e.g. healings and exorcisms), positions and dispositions will be turned upside down. The 'others' outside the system, such as strangers, outcasts, and misfits, will be invited to come in, and 'wicked' insiders will be banished to exile. Consequently, otherness and hybridity are constitutive of Christian identity, according to Jesus, whereas exile denominates a type of otherness that seems to be beyond redemption and irreversibly demarcates sound from toxic (infectious) alterity.

## **About the author**

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# 7 Discerning the Body in 1 Corinthians 10: The Physical Negotiation of Exclusion and Inclusion by Paul as a Theologian of the Body

*Peter-Ben Smit*

## Abstract

This contribution considers the discussion about the negotiation of the boundaries of the community of people ‘in Christ’ in 1 Corinthians 10 from the vantage point of the physical dimension of social relations. In doing so, this chapter argues that bodily behaviour is key in Paul’s exploration of forms of inclusion into and exclusion from the Corinthian community of Christ devotees. During this exploration, Paul emerges as a thinker for whom physical behaviour (and its interpretation) matters intensely, which can be seen as a more general invitation to consider Paul as a theologian of the body and to pay attention in a more focused manner to the role of the body in theologies in the Christian tradition.

**Keywords:** Paul, Body of Christ, Food, Meal, Judith Butler, Lord’s Supper

## Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 10, boundaries matter. Certain forms of behaviour, especially the consumption of food, are deemed incompatible with sharing in the blood and body of Christ; the body needs to be disciplined (see also 1 Cor. 9:27) in order to be, as it were, a means of communion with Christ and only

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with Christ (and his body, the assembly, see v. 17). Although the body is to be controlled, according to what Paul has said just before entering into his discussion of food and drink (1 Cor. 11:1–16 deals with disciplining the body with regard to sex and its beautification), this does not at all mean that the body has become unimportant. Rather, the reverse is true: because the body is a key site, if not the key site, in which allegiance to Christ and other lords and gods (cf. 1 Cor. 8:5) is being negotiated, it deserves particular care and cultivation to be an instrument of fellowship with only Christ – and through such participation in Christ, with other Christ devotees.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Paul is very much a theologian of the body: not just because he has much to say about how the body should be treated, but especially because the body is, in all its precariousness,<sup>2</sup> still a vital dimension of a person's being part of Christ's body.<sup>3</sup> This contribution explores the role of the body in 1 Corinthians 10 by considering it as the site where a precarious negotiation needs to take place in order to ensure that the devotee's body can remain in fellowship with Christ's body.<sup>4</sup> The precariousness of the body is given with the liminal situation of Christ devotees and enhanced through the 'porous' character of bodies: they can be permeated by different powers. Christian bodies are

1 References to bodies will remain generic in this essay, yet not all bodies are, of course, the same, for reasons having to do with, for example, gender, health, age, ethnicity, social status, and more. In the exegesis of 1 Cor. 10, class has long been a key assumption, in particular associated with Gerd Theissen; see, for instance, his 'Soziale Schichtung in der korinthischen Gemeinde: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des hellenistischen Urchristentums', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 65 (1974): 232–72. This assumption has recently (and fairly convincingly) been challenged by Philip L. Tite, 'Roman Diet and Meat Consumption: Reassessing Elite Access to Meat in I Corinthians 8 and 10', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42 (2019): 185–222, arguing that access to meat was much less an elite privilege than Theissen had suggested.

2 For a discussion of the precarious character of the body in the context of gatherings of people, see, e.g. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2015).

3 The relationship between person and body cannot be explored extensively here, yet in Pauline anthropology, the human person is, of course, more than the body as such, where dimensions such as *νοῦς* and *πνεῦμα* are just as important as *σάρξ* and *σῶμα*. For an extensive discussion, see Sarah Harding, *Paul's Eschatological Anthropology: The Dynamics of Human Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

4 In doing so, this contribution continues a line of thought concerning Paul as a theologian of the body begun in Peter-Ben Smit, 'The Resurrection of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 11: Paul as a Theologian of the Body in Conversation with Judith Butler', *Lectio Difficilior* (2019): 1, accessed 12 October 2022, [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/19\\_1/smit\\_peter\\_ben\\_the\\_resurrection\\_of\\_the\\_body\\_of\\_christ%20.html](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/19_1/smit_peter_ben_the_resurrection_of_the_body_of_christ%20.html). For a call for attention to the body, see also, e.g. Christian Strecker, "'It Matters!': Der Körper in der jüngeren neutestamentlichen Forschung', *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 14 (2011): 2–14.

both already ‘in Christ’ and yet also still ‘in the world’, while – in the case of 1 Corinthians 10 – by ingesting certain foodstuffs, they are connected physically with particular lords and gods. In arguing this, use will be made of thought-provoking ideas developed by, for example, Sarah Harding on the permeable character and liminal existence of bodies in Paul’s thought<sup>5</sup> and by Christina Risch on the realism involved in Paul’s estimation of the way foodstuffs communicate fellowship with deities.<sup>6</sup> Beyond its relationship to this kind of research, this study can also be seen as contributing to broader discussions on the role of the body in early Christianity (and Christian theology at large).<sup>7</sup> In doing so, this work both reflects on inclusion and exclusion in the letters of Paul and contributes to the ongoing discovery of Paul as a theologian of the body. The latter means that the body is for Paul not just an object of his theologizing, but that physical experiences and acts are also frequently the starting point of his theologizing, which not just reveals something about the structure of his arguments but also indicates, at least in 1 Corinthians 10, that the physical is of fundamental theological importance to him. More particularly, it will become clear that the body is an important site for the negotiation of boundaries and questions of inclusion and exclusion. These boundaries also pertain, in 1 Corinthians 10, to the question of where faithfulness to Christ ends and apostasy (due to idolatry) begins.

## Bodies and the Physical in 1 Corinthians 10: A Survey

From the very start, physical experiences are a key theme in 1 Corinthians 10. Already in his long introduction that leads into his consideration of the

5 On permeability see: Harding, *Anthropology*, as well as Michael Lakey, *The Ritual World of Paul the Apostle: Metaphysics, Community and Symbol in 1 Corinthians 10-11* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 131; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1999), 188. On liminality in general and in this section of 1 Corinthians in particular, see B.J. Oropeza, ‘Apostasy in the Wilderness: Paul’s Message to the Corinthians in a State of Eschatological Liminality’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (2000): 69–86.

6 Christina Risch, *Dynamische Verbindung – Die “Präsenz” Christi im Herrenmahl* (Münster: LIT, 2019), following in the footsteps of earlier work by Günter Röhser, e.g. ‘Vorstellungen von der Präsenz Christi im Ritual nach 1Kor 11,17-34’, in *Mahl und religiöse Identität im frühen Christentum/Meals and Religious Identity in Early Christianity*, ed. Matthias Klinghardt and Hal Taussing (Tübingen: Francke, 2012), 131–58.

7 See, for example, the contributions in Gregor Etzelmüller and Annette Weissenrieder, eds., *Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), as well as the recent monograph by Brittany E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2021).



food customs of the Corinthian Christ devotees, Paul dwells on the bodies of οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν that were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea (v. 1). Paul's use of the plural both creates a sense of connection and 'inscribes' the entire community into the foundational narratives of Israel (also by rereading these narratives, of course).<sup>8</sup> Bodies also play a key role in verses 2–4: baptism in the cloud and in the sea (v. 2) suggests physicality, irrespective of what kind of 'rite' of baptism Paul may have been thinking of; eating spiritual food (v. 3), likely a reference to manna, also has to do with the body, as does drinking spiritual drink from the 'spiritual rock' that followed them, namely Christ (v. 4). Here, Christ and the rock from which Moses derived water (Exodus 17; Numbers 20) have seemingly merged.<sup>9</sup> Even if the food and the drink in verses 3–4, both qualified as πνευματικός, are to be understood as references to completely disembodied nourishment by Christ without any link to the provision of manna and water in the desert, the physical metaphor (of eating and drinking) remains striking, while there are still plenty of references prior to and following these verses to support the position that the physical matters here.<sup>10</sup> In verse 7, then, the development of the people of Israel into idolators (εἰδωλολάτραι) is illustrated yet again with a reference to a very physical activity: ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πίνειν καὶ ἀνέστησαν παίζειν. This is elaborated upon further in verse 8: because some engaged in πορνεία, twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Here Paul uses associations between idolatry, sexual immorality, and, apparently, certain forms of commensality,<sup>11</sup> which can be seen as a commonplace or at least as a connection of motifs occurring more frequently in antiquity, as, for example, Philo's *De vita contemplativa* shows. All of this serves, as Paul argues in verses 9–13, as an example (τυπικῶς, v. 11) for 'us', in particular in situations characterized by undergoing a 'test' or 'temptation' (πειρασμός, v. 13). By setting up the scene in this manner, Paul can address his key topic, as

8 Precisely how Paul uses these narratives cannot be the topic of this contribution, but see Marika Pulkkinen, 'Teaching through the Psalms: Allusions to the Wilderness Tradition in 1 Corinthians 10,1-10 and the Origin of the Passage', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 33 (2019): 244–63.

9 The historical backgrounds for the motif and tradition of Paul's expression here are complex, cf. for a brief consideration, e.g. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 279–80. Recent, more extensive explorations can be found in, e.g. Daniel Lanzinger, "Der Felsen aber war Christus" (1 Kor 10,4), *Biblische Zeitschrift* 62 (2018): 63–79.

10 For a brief discussion, see, e.g. Trent Rogers, *God and the Idols: Representations of God in 1 Corinthians 8-10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 189–90.

11 The backgrounds of Exodus 32 and Numbers 25 are of importance here; in both cases, eating, drinking, idolatry, and (at least possible hints of) sexual indulgence (cf. Ex. 32:6) play a role – see, e.g. Charles Perrot, 'Les Exemples du Désert (1 Cor 10:6-11)', *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983): 437–52. See also Rogers, *God*, 192–94.

he puts it in v. 14: Διόπερ, ἀγαπητοί μου, φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας.<sup>12</sup> He has by then established that idolatry and food have a close connection with each other and has found support for this conviction in the tradition common to the Corinthians and to himself: the Scriptures of Israel that provide ‘for us’ (v. 11) the example of ‘our ancestors’ (v. 1). With this exhortation in verse 14, the topic of inclusion and exclusion is also introduced, as fleeing from something is the opposite of including it, of course.

Following on from this paraenesis, Paul seeks to draw his audience in by means of an argument based on rhetorical questions concerning the character of what must be key acts of the meal of the Corinthian community – that is, the blessing of the cup and the breaking of the bread (v. 16). Both acts are said to constitute *κοινωνία* with Christ, while the partaking (μετέχω, v. 17) of the one bread also creates the community as ἓν σῶμα (v. 17). All of this is, of course, deeply physical: allegiance with Christ is here, at least here, not primarily a matter of faith (if conceptualized noetically) but a question of embodied belonging (which can very well be an expression of a ‘faith commitment’ in the way in which such commitments structured Greco-Roman society).<sup>13</sup> Paul restates his argument in verse 18 by means of an analogy of the Israelites becoming *κοινωνοὶ* (partners, participants) of the altar by eating the sacrifices associated with the same. This analogy also presumably helps to connect the table of meal fellowship in the Corinthian community (not an altar in the Greco-Roman sense of the word) and the meal fellowship connected with sacrifices made in Corinthian temples (cf. the repeated use of *κοινωνοὶ* in v. 20 and equation of the two ‘tables’ in v. 21). Before he addresses the topic of this incompatibility, Paul first circumvents a discussion which he had already cautiously navigated in 1 Corinthians 8: the question of the existence in any ‘real’ sense of deities other than the object(s) of worship of the Christ devotees. His approach in verse 19 is to ask the question rhetorically, thereby making his audience participate in his argument actively, of whether he himself ascribes reality to these ‘beings’ (or ‘non-beings’) and the foodstuffs offered to them, presumably

12 Here, as elsewhere, the precise location of this ‘idolatry’ remains unspecified. In scholarship much attention has been given to both Corinthian temples (in the background of 1 Cor. 8:10) and the meat market (1 Cor. 10:25), but Tite, ‘Diet’, 214–15 suggests that attention could also be given to shrines in households, which, for example when located in the kitchen, could also easily be associated with food served to guests.

13 Following Morgan’s interpretation. Cf. Theresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015); *πίστις*-language is notably absent in 1 Cor. 8, 10–11 (in 11:18 the terminology has a more generic sense). Still, relationships that can well be conceptualized as relationships of *πίστις* are at the heart of Paul’s arguments here.

suggesting a negative answer but not giving it explicitly.<sup>14</sup> This tactic gives Paul the space to deal with the (perceived) reality of idols in the experience of compatriots of the Corinthian Christ devotees, who, as we see in the discussion of Chapter 8, were themselves also not equally surefooted in this regard. Thus, he can still say what he says in verse 20: he does not say that idols exist but that ‘they’ sacrifice (θύουσιν – the subject, made explicit as ‘pagans’ in many translations is, in fact, unidentified) to them and not to God. Such an offering implies a fellowship with these deities (whether they exist or not) and not with God, which is what Paul wishes to avoid. He sums up his position in language closely related to the body in verse 21, namely by focusing on the consumption of food and drink: οὐ δύνασθε ποτήριον κυρίου πίνειν καὶ ποτήριον δαιμονίων, οὐ δύνασθε τραπέζης κυρίου μετέχειν καὶ τραπέζης δαιμονίων. Next, Paul connects this attitude with not provoking the Lord (by at least in appearance worshipping other deities, v. 22) and then moves to the questions regarding what is lawful and useful (v. 23) in combination with seeking what is advantageous for the other (v. 24).

Similar to 1 Corinthians 8, Paul takes a double position here. On the one hand, he argues that on the basis of the Lord’s supreme (and probably unique) lordship, everything bought in the (meat) market can be eaten without having a guilty conscience. (It seems likely that the buyer’s conscience is meant here, vv. 25–26.) This attitude is also possible whenever one is invited to a meal: as long as food is not identified explicitly as having been offered to idols, everything is fine (v. 27). As soon as the situation changes – that is, when someone indicates τοῦτο ἱερόθυτόν ἐστιν (v. 28) – then abstinence is required. This is again because of conscience, yet not that of the Christ devotee but rather that of the host, who might think that the devotee holds a less than exclusive allegiance to the Lord should they accept food that leads to fellowship with other deities. That at least seems to be what Paul may have had in mind here. The freedom as a Christ devotee to eat whatever one likes is, thereby, not really impacted; yet it is important to retain clarity as

14 The question of Paul’s consistency with regard to both the reality of deities other than those he had committed himself to and the permissibility of practices suggestive of communion with them in 1 Corinthians is a long-standing one. Joël Delobel, ‘Coherence and Relevance of 1 Cor 8-10’, in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. Reimund Bieringer (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 177–90 is probably right when he points out that the contextuality of Paul’s argument and his having to deal with various other points of view when addressing the distinct cases discussed in 1 Cor. 8 and 10 make it likely that Paul’s inconsistency is only apparent: ‘Paul is consistent in arguing that idol food is neutral in principle, but that it can have various meanings according to the cultural and cultic context’ (186). For an extensive survey of proposals regarding the (in) coherence of Paul here, see Rogers, *God*, 1–28.

to with whom one is in fellowship and with whom one is not, at least as far as deities are concerned. In the final verses of this chapter (vv. 29–33), Paul seems to indicate that one way of making food acceptable for oneself is by giving thanks over it to God (to whom it all belongs, cf. v. 26), a possibility that may be precluded if food is identified as having been offered to another deity already. Again, all of this indicates an important role for the body, as it is the body that eats or abstains from particular foodstuffs, and it is physical behaviour of this kind that may or may not impact the conscience of either Christ devotees or their hosts at meals in contexts different from the Corinthian *ἐκκλησία*. Naturally, the mental and spiritual dispositions of the people involved also play a role; yet it is, in the end, the concrete consumption of concrete foodstuffs that makes the difference.

### The Body as a Site of Inclusion and Exclusion

The observations about the body in 1 Corinthians 10 can now be further explored by analysing what role it plays precisely regarding the boundaries that Paul draws in this section of the letter. First, brief consideration is given to how, because of the importance of food, the body becomes the site of the negotiation for competing forms of fellowship (competing, that is, from Paul's perspective). Second, reflection is made upon how it is precisely the body that determines one's position on the social and cultic map of Corinth: boundaries are physical. Third, the body is considered further in terms of its apparent permeability, its precarious character, and its liminal position. In this way, it will become clear how questions concerning physical inclusion and exclusion (specifically of certain foodstuffs into the body, implying the communion of this body with the table from which the food derives and hence fellowship with the patron of this table) are the driving force behind Paul's considerations. Thus, the (social and 'cultic') relations of persons 'in Christ' are negotiated through the body.

First, as already indicated above, Paul's point of entry into the discussion of idolatry (v. 14) is by way of a relatively lengthy prelude about the connections between eating, drinking, and idolatry in the Scriptures of Israel, which then leads into a debate about meal fellowship in Corinth, or, more specifically, the consumption or non-consumption of certain foodstuffs. (Paul does not say anything about not attending certain meals.) The body itself is not discussed as such, yet most of what Paul describes pertains to physical behaviour. It is very difficult to imagine any kind of eating and drinking taking place without a body; Paul's references to eating and drinking in

the wilderness, which might be interpreted metaphorically, also must have some physical dimension in order to make sense as a preparation for this argument about the relatively down-to-earth eating and drinking taking place in Corinth. The body thus plays an important role because food and drink are involved. With that, the body must also play an important role as soon as it comes to questions of inclusion and exclusion.

Second, continuing the thought expressed at the end of the previous paragraph, one could say that it is the body's ingestion of foodstuffs that determines its position (and that of the person of whom this body is part) on what can be called the social and cultic map of Corinth. Paul refrains from proposing that one should, as a Christ devotee, not eat at all with certain others and refuse invitations, which is itself important, as it leaves much room for social manoeuvrability among the members of the ἐκκλησία. Yet Paul does suggest their bodies' consumption encounters a limit in situations when partaking of a foodstuff would mean shifting their position on the 'cultic map' of Corinth by affiliating with a Lord different from Christ. This happens when a foodstuff is offered that is explicitly identified as having been offered to another deity. In fact, this is the only kind of idolatry that is to be avoided, and it consists of a physical act: abstinence from food, which draws a boundary and safeguards one's communion with Christ and one's being part of the one body of the Christ devotees. Paul's attempt to discipline the body in this respect has to do, as he outlines, not so much with concerns about the Christ devotees and their consciences as such – they are, in fact, free to do whatever they like regarding idols, as Paul does not think that idols have a 'real' kind of existence –<sup>15</sup> but instead has to do with concern for those others who ascribe much more reality to the deities at issue and may mistake the (bodily) practice of 'Christian freedom' as a pledge of fellowship to another deity than Christ (which might not have posed any problem at all for many in a polytheistic setting such as Corinth). As in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul seems to be following two lines of thought simultaneously here. On the one hand, he forcefully outlines how participation in food that somehow 'belongs' to a certain deity implies fellowship with this deity (e.g. vv. 16–18, 21).<sup>16</sup> In doing so, he probably repeats a cultic commonplace; indeed, his use

15 For a different view, see e.g. Rogers, *God*, 198: 'Paul agrees with their belief that the idol-gods are not real, but he argues that there is another, demonic reality behind the worship of idol-gods.' I would maintain that Paul is, however, more specific than that: this reality exists for the 'weak' and those not subscribing to forms of monotheism in the Jewish tradition (of which the Christ devotees are part).

16 Also stressed by, for instance, Rogers, *God*, 187, *passim*, referring to Joop Smit, "Do Not Be Idolaters": Paul's Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1–22', *Novum Testamentum* 39 (1997): 40–53, 52.

of rhetorical questions, as in verse 16, would suggest this. Such questions only work well when one can anticipate the intended answer as a building block, contributed, as it were, by one's audience, for the further development of one's argument. Simultaneously, however, Paul also (at least) strongly hints that he, when push comes to shove, denies the existence of any other deities but Christ, a logical consequence of the 'Christological monotheism' that Paul confesses,<sup>17</sup> and for that reason could eat and permit others to eat whatever they want. Yet, in a third step, he argues that some physical discipline is required nonetheless, as misunderstandings on the part of those who do accept anything that looks, walks, and talks like a deity as a deity are to be avoided. This then does not so much restrict the participation of 'others' in the communion with Christ that the Corinthian ἐκκλησία celebrates at its meals; conversely, it restricts the physical participation of Corinthian Christ devotees in the meals of others, albeit under very specific conditions and possibly only with regard to certain foodstuffs.

Third, all of this also asks questions about the body as an 'instrument of communion'. In particular, this concerns the combination of the body's centrality with what appears to be its precarious character; as Paul puts it in verse 12: "Ὡστε ὁ δοκῶν ἐστάναι βλεπέτω μὴ πέσῃ. The body seems to be in a liminal position and is, with the person of which it is a dimension, able to be shifted from one kind of allegiance to another. Here it might be helpful to draw on the notion of the permeability of the self and specifically also of the body, as Harding, for example, has highlighted,<sup>18</sup> in combination with the observation that a certain 'numinous' quality of foodstuffs and eating seems to be presupposed by Paul, which is in tune with the social and cultic landscape that he inhabits.<sup>19</sup> While Harding focuses on sin, on

17 A rich and nuanced discussion is offered by Rogers, *God*. See also: Bernhard Reitsma, *Kwetsbare liefde* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2017), 70–82.

18 See Harding, *Anthropology*.

19 As it has been highlighted by Risch, *Verbindung*, drawing on Röhser, 'Vorstellungen'. There does seem to be a tendency to allow for a more 'numinous' quality in cultic foodstuffs in more recent research; see, for instance, the difference in estimation and emphasis between Wendell Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (Atlanta: SBL, 1985) and Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in Its Context* (Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University, 1993), as well as the contextualization provided by Khiok-Khng Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10: A Formal Analysis with Suggestions for Chinese, Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), esp. 94–119. A recent contribution is Lakey, *World*, 109–52, who argues in a nuanced manner and with reference to Greco-Roman divine-human commensality in, for instance, magical contexts for a high degree of 'realism' in divine-human communication and communion at and through the meal. This would go against the argument of Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft* (Tübingen: Francke, 1996), 308–10, who takes position against a 'real-substanzhaftes Verständnis' (308) of the participation in the blood

the one hand, and the Holy Spirit, on the other, as representatives of the old and new aeons in the overlap of which (embodied) ‘selves’ devoted to Christ are caught up,<sup>20</sup> *mutatis mutandis*, her model of the permeability of Christ devotees can also be applied to the situation of early Christian bodies and the consumption of foodstuffs charged with numinous significance.<sup>21</sup> This is the case because such bodies are not only in a liminal (‘in-between’) position temporally (i.e. between the old and new aeons) but also with regard to the physical performance of allegiance to Christ: they are caught in between the table of the Lord and the tables of other lords. Through ingestion one is, it seems, permeated by the deity to which the food has been offered, thereby entering into communion with this deity (and with those equally associated with such a goddess or god). The importance of physical consumption and not just being present at a meal is indicated by the references that Paul makes to eating and drinking in the course of his argument. For instance, in verse 7 φαγείν καὶ πίνειν, in verse 18 οἱ ἐσθίοντες, in verse 21 πίνειν, in verse 25 and verses 27–28 ἐσθίετε, and in verse 31 εἴτε οὖν ἐσθίετε εἴτε πίνετε, all point to the significance of the physical act of ingesting food and drink at a meal and, with that, to the importance of the body as the site where, through consumption, communion is determined. Thus, a Christ devotee’s own inclusion into or exclusion from a particular communion is negotiated through a rather precariously positioned and permeable body, here specifically through this body’s literal permeation by certain foodstuffs in the acts of eating and drinking.

A consequence of this role of the body, then, is also that it becomes the place where the πειρασμός of the Corinthian Christ devotees takes place, which Paul refers to in verse 13 (cf. v. 9) and which may echo the wilderness of the Exodus as a(nother) liminal place where testing took place (cf. vv. 1–11).<sup>22</sup> With all the differences that exist between the Sinai wilderness and a dinner table in Corinth, the similarity is that testing takes place in a liminal situation (between the exit out of Egypt and the entry into the promised land and between the old and new aeons respectively) and that such testing is focused on physical behaviour, more specifically, the ingestion of certain

of Christ and prefers an interpretation according to which the cup represents the ‘Gemeinschaft der Mahlteilnehmer untereinander’ (309).

20 See the argument in Harding, *Anthropology*.

21 For emphasis on the relational aspect and reluctance vis-à-vis a possible numinous character of the food, see, however, Matthias Konradt, *Gericht und Gemeinde: eine Studie zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Gerichtsaussagen im Rahmen der paulinischen Ekklesiologie und Ethik im 1 Thess und 1 Kor* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 389–90.

22 See esp. Oropeza, ‘Apostasy’; cf. Strecker, ‘Leben’.

foodstuffs and drinks. Consequently, this behaviour, which determines the position of Christ devotees on the social and cultic map of Corinthian society, at the very least in the eyes of their contemporaries, is the starting point of Paul's argument, just as physical experiences at the *κυριακὸν δεῖπνον* (the Lord's supper) will be his point of departure in 1 Cor 11:17–34.<sup>23</sup>

### **Detheologizing Paul – Retheologizing the Ordinary?**

The emphasis placed on the negotiation of allegiance to Christ in what must be regarded as fairly everyday decisions, such as buying food and participating in meals, could give the impression that Paul is concerned with fairly mundane affairs. 'Theological' matters, such as the observation that partaking of particular foodstuffs means to enter into fellowship with certain deities, are presupposed rather than argued or problematized. Paul never elaborates how this 'works', or, for that matter, how he conceptualizes the presence of a deity at a meal (and in foodstuffs); apparently this was not a matter of debate for him or for his interlocutors, as it would become later in the history of what had by then become Christianity. Yet this perspective can also be reversed: rather than wondering why Paul is so preoccupied with such everyday matters, one can also argue that for Paul the mundane is important because the body is important. As the body is an important starting point for theologizing (because the body is a key site of and instrument for communion [*κοινωνία*] with Christ and it is the body that is entangled in everyday affairs, such as the procurement of food, participation in meals, and so on), then such matters also become of theological significance. In fact, buying food and eating it together is a place where the body's allegiance to Christ or idols is negotiated through the body and its ingestion of food, while the body is, quite literally, permeated by that which belongs to the table of either Christ or other deities and accordingly drawn into one direction or the other. All of this makes the body that is devoted to Christ precarious, entangled as it is in the complex web of relationships that a society consists of; the body constitutes an important site for the (always contested) performance and negotiation of allegiances. At the same time, the body's entanglement in everyday life also makes precisely this ordinary life theologically and spiritually important. While all of this may seem self-explanatory, or even banal (since who can exist in a disembodied manner?), the point is worth making nonetheless, as the body's significance can easily be overlooked

23 See Smit, 'Resurrection'.



in discourses privileging the spiritual or the noetic. The importance of the latter is, of course, not negated by the stress that is placed on the body here; rather, they are placed within their proper context, which is the embodied existence proper to human beings.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

When concluding on the above considerations, the following may be maintained:

First, although the issues at stake can be seen to be primarily social (who can associate and eat with whom?) and metaphysical (what is the effect of certain foodstuffs? do pagan gods really exist? etc.), physical behaviour is really what matters. Allegiance to Christ is performed physically by means of partaking of and abstaining from certain foodstuffs. In particular, it is the body of the Christ devotee as seen by others that is the focus of all negotiations of inclusion and exclusion in 1 Corinthians 10. The starting point of Paul's argument is physical behaviour and all that is, according to him, attached to it, and they are his attempt in this text to find a middle way between apostasy (caused by idolatry) and anti-social behaviour, which shows the great extent to which he is a theologian of the body.

Second, the negotiation of social relationships (and of inclusion and exclusion) that occurs throughout 1 Corinthians 10 – as meals are performances of social relationships, expressing and (re)constituting them – takes place through physical behaviour; with that, the body and its (disciplined) behaviour become the site where such relationships are negotiated. Indeed, the body is not the body in and of itself but the body as committed to Christ and especially as it is seen and evaluated by outsiders (cf. v. 29!). These outsiders, it seems, must not get the impression that Christ devotees can enjoy multiple forms of *κοινωνία* (just like 'weak' insiders must not get this idea, cf. 1 Cor 8:1–13), even if Paul's own metaphysical position seems to be that, in the end, all of this does not really matter given the lack of reality and power that he ascribes to pagan deities. Yet, as Paul cannot control how others see and interpret the bodies of Christ devotees, he is forced to suggest

24 Naturally, this positioning of the noetic and spiritual in the context of embodiment also has consequences for one's understanding of what the contours of the Christian faith are from a more systematic-theological perspective. See, for example, Mattijs Ploeger, *Verkündete Botschaft oder verleiblichte Lebenswirklichkeit? Über die apostolische Sukzession als Hinweis auf einer ökumenischen Grunddifferenz*, *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 111 (2021), 61–88.

disciplining these bodies regarding consumption as soon as such consumption is turned into an explicit performance of *κοινωνία* with another deity than Christ and may be perceived, both by those outside of the community and the ‘weak’ members of the community itself, as a form of apostasy. This of course also means that Paul may have argued differently in a different context, for example, one in which eating was not as strongly associated with affiliating oneself with powers and principalities other than Christ.

Third, when further considering the physical negotiation of allegiance to and communion with Christ (a negotiation of inclusion and exclusion into this communion), it is important to note that Paul engages in a search and exploration rather than in the development of fixed rules and regulations. His argument is deeply contextual and depends on the ‘reading’ of physical behaviour by others, in particular by those outside of the *ἐκκλησία*, in contrast to the situation in 1 Cor 8:1–13, where the perspective of those inside of the assembly matters. Presumably, in a context in which eating meat associated with other deities would not have had the implication of being seen as compromising one’s fidelity to and communion with Christ (i.e. engaging in apostasy), such consumption would not have been as problematic as it appears to be in Corinth. A contemporary reception of Pauline ethical considerations in 1 Corinthians 10 would, therefore, be well-advised to take into account the contextuality of his approach and to continue his search for appropriate behaviour in new contexts rather than to replicate Paul’s findings for the Corinthian Christ devotees in contexts that are rather different from Corinth.<sup>25</sup> The answer to the question of what kind of consumption signifies what kind of allegiance in contexts in the twenty-first century is quite open.

Finally, as far as this text and its interpretation can be used to develop perspectives for *convivencia* among, for instance, Muslims and Christians (as this is part of the focus of this volume), Paul’s line of thought can lead to at least two suggestions. First, it is noticeable that Paul does not problematize ‘interreligious’ commensality as such, nor does he threaten any sanctions.<sup>26</sup> This may create some space. Second, Paul is also clear that as long as foodstuffs do not clearly signify allegiance with a deity other than the Lord, they can be freely consumed. Third, as soon as foodstuffs imply

25 See the appeal of Michael Wolter, “Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s” (1 Corinthians 10, 24): Pauline Ethics According to 1 Corinthians’, in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 199–218.

26 The quotation marks around ‘interreligious’ indicate that to use the term would be rather anachronistic for a first-century setting for lack of anything that could be called a religion.

the association with another deity other than the Lord (to be sure, not so much from the perspective of the Christ devotee involved, but rather from the perspective of others), their consumption becomes problematic. This position would indeed also suggest, in reverse, that Paul would likely consider any devotee of another lord or god (be it Mithras, Zeus, Bacchus, Cybele, Artemis, or Athena) who happened to visit Corinth and joined the Lord's Supper to be pledging their life to Christ, since participating in that meal means communion with Christ and no other Lord.

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# 8 The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter

*Jacobus (Kobus) Kok*

## Abstract

In this contribution, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in earliest Christianity is investigated by focusing on 1 Peter, which is often considered to be an exegetical stepchild, so to speak. New perspectives from social identity theory permit us to approach 1 Peter in ways that make explicit what is in fact already implicit in the text and its social dynamics. This contribution will critically examine 1 Peter through the novel lens of social identity and self-categorization theory to illustrate the manner in which 1 Peter exemplifies what Miroslav Volf correctly referred to as 'soft difference', providing a new way of looking at the dynamics involved in inclusion, exclusion, but also drawing and transcending boundaries in early Christianity.

**Keywords:** social identity, boundaries, soft difference, Miroslav Volf, 1 Peter

## Introduction

In this contribution, I want to examine the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in earliest Christianity by focusing on 1 Peter. The figure of Peter was one of the most important early Christian leaders and apostles of Jesus. However, 1 Peter is often described by some to be an exegetical stepchild. Normally, people do not turn to 1 Peter when they think of examples of early Christian sensitivity to outsiders.<sup>1</sup> But new perspectives from social identity

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the comprehensive volume *Sensitivity to Outsiders* edited by Kok et al., 1 Peter is not discussed. J. Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth, and Christopher M. Hays, eds., *Sensitivity Towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship Between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament,

theory enable us to approach 1 Peter in a new way<sup>2</sup>. In this contribution, I will critically examine 1 Peter through this novel lens to illustrate some of the dynamics involved in inclusion and exclusion in early Christianity.

The exploration will unfold as follows: firstly, the socio-historical background of 1 Peter will be sketched out, and secondly, 1 Peter will be exegeted by means of socio-scientific exegetical methodology with a focus on social identity theory as a heuristic tool.

## Positioning the Text in a Given Socio-Historical Context

1 Peter is connected to Peter, an apostle of Jesus who is considered to be one of the most important leaders in the early Church. His insights would shape the development of the Christ-following movement in significant ways. However, there is also much debate about whether Peter personally was the author, since Peter was a Galilean Fisherman, and the Greek of this letter is highly polished.<sup>3</sup> Those in favour of an earlier date would argue that it might have been dictated by Peter but written by the hand of someone skilled in formal Greek. Those who favour a later date would place this letter's composition after the death of Peter and after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE when the term Christian was first used, a term which occurs in the New Testament only in Acts 11:26 and 1 Pet. 4:16. This would presuppose a later date towards the second half of the first century as Christianity spread amongst non-Jews and in a context in which mainstream Judaism wanted to distance itself from Christ followers. The majority of scholars nowadays do not favour the view that early Christians were officially persecuted by the Romans during the first century, except perhaps during the time of Nero and Domitian, although this is also debated. However, I am of the opinion that the experience of suffering the letter expresses (1 Pet. 1:6; 4:16) does not have to entail Roman persecution but could be a result of conversion

ser. 2, 364 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). See also Miroslav Volf, 'Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter', *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 1–17, who refers to Niebuhr who does not discuss 1 Peter, although this letter is all about the relationship between church and culture and directly relates to the issue of inclusion and exclusion.

2 J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds. *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). See also Laura J. Hunt, '1 Peter', in *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 527–42.

3 For a balanced New Testament introduction which presents all the issues, see Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 463–80.

and the social marginalization experienced by people in a group-oriented or dyadic social context who deviate from their own group and encounter opposition from other dominant groups. In the authentic Pauline material, we already see Paul's experience of marginalization and affliction in the period 48–64 CE (e.g. Paul in Philippians 1:7, 13–14, 17, 28–29; 4:14). Thus, it would not be strange to see a similar phenomenon in 1 Peter whether one decides for an earlier or later date. From the earliest times, the letter is connected to the person or legacy of Peter the apostle, and for that reason I presuppose that in the production thereof, whether by Peter himself or a close associate, it still strongly relates to the legacy of the apostle Peter and thus carries authority for us as important witness of early Christian thinking.<sup>4</sup> The author wants to console his audience with a message of hope and an understanding of identity that would help them to endure affliction and marginalization.

### Social-Scientific Exegesis of 1 Peter

In 1 Peter, the author wants to shape and sketch the implication of the new identity that believers acquired after their conversion and how that creates in them a sense of identity which should result in a particular ethos within their socio-historical context.

#### Written to 'Aliens'/Foreigners

In 1 Pet. 1:1 we already encounter a very interesting metaphor, namely that the believers to whom he is writing are described as being aliens or foreigners (he uses the term *παρεπιδήμιος*). The mere term 'alien' presupposes a person or group of persons who are foreign, strangers, and outsiders, who find themselves in a situation where they are the 'other'. This, *ipso facto*, is a metaphor which presupposes the implicit challenge of such people either to assimilate and do away with the boundaries of the host culture or live in and with a form of social identity complexity.

Let us turn, then, for a moment and look at the manner in which the author sketches their pre-conversion identity, which also clearly describes to us the nature of the *evaluative aspect* of social identity theory from which

4 See J. Ramsey Michaels and Bruce Manning Metzger, *1 Peter*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), xxxi–xxxiv; lxii–lxvi for a thorough discussion of the issues related to the authorship of 1 Peter.

the ingroup reflects on the outgroup and determines the boundaries.<sup>5</sup> The author as prototype of the group describes their previous identity in negative terms and in this way also forms the cognitive map with which they are to look at the world. With reference to their previous lives, they are described in the following negative ways:

- They used to live in ignorance (1 Pet. 1:14 ἀγνοία).
- They lived in empty, futile ways inherited from their ancestors (1 Pet. 1:18 ματαίαις ὑμῶν ἀναστροφῆς πατροπαραδότου).
- They participated in all sorts of things that Gentiles indulge in, like drunkenness (οἰνοφλυγίαις), lustful sensuality (ἀσελγείαις ἐπιθυμίαις), carousing (κώμοις), drinking parties and unlawful idolatry (πότοις καὶ ἄθεμίτοις εἰδωλοατρίαις (1 Pet. 1:18).
- They were not God's people (1 Pet. 2:10 οὐ λαός).
- They were those who have not received God's mercy (1 Pet. 2:10).

### The Contrast Between Then and Now

This negative portrayal of their previous identity is contrasted with the current identity as exiles in the diaspora (1 Pet. 1:1 – παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς) who have been elected and radically drawn into the new family of God.

The author of 1 Peter refers in 1 Pet. 2:10 to the insiders and their former identity by means of a clear contrast strengthened by the (indefinite and negative) particle ποτε (once upon a time) with the temporal adverb νῦν (now) (see Fig. 8.1).

Once they were in a state where they could rightly be called 'not my/a people' οὐ λαός, *but now* they can be called 'God's people' (λαός θεοῦ). Furthermore, it is interesting how the author of 1 Peter writes that once they did not receive mercy, but now, as God's people, they have received mercy. In the English the force of the original Greek is lost. In Greek νῦν δὲ ἐλεηθέντες (now you have received mercy) occurs in the aorist passive form of the participle, which is also called the divine passive – that is, that God is the one who does unto the object the action of the verb. This is contrasted with οὐκ ἠλεημένοι (no mercy) of the previous dispensation whereby they had not received mercy and is accordingly expressed by the medium form in the Greek. The message expressed in the Greek is thus rather strong in the sense that it creates not only a strong antithesis and discontinuity between the

5 For more information on social identity theory and its use in Biblical Studies, see Chapter 4 by Jack Barentsen in the present volume.

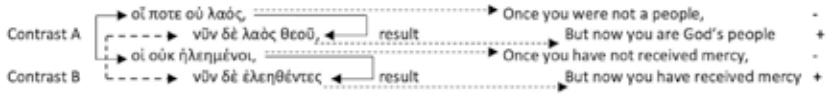


Figure 8.1 Former and New Identity (© Jacobus Kok)

ποτε (once) and the νῦν (now) but also expresses that God himself has acted and gave them mercy. The aorist passive in the context of νῦν δὲ ἐλεηθέντες (now you have received mercy) wants to express the fact of an action (cf. the aorist) that happened in the transformation of their status and is contrasted with the perfect participle medium of οἱ οὐκ ἠλεγμένοι (once you were not chosen), where the perfect expresses the former state of being.

What is already clear from this linguistic discussion is the way in which 1 Peter wants to communicate in unambiguous terms that believers have received a new identity which is to be contrasted with their old identity. In this way, the text seeks to serve as a vehicle to validate and strengthen a new sense of identity and self-categorization for the ingroup. It needs to be recognized, however, that every attempt to describe identity for the insiders in such dualistic fashion *ipso facto* implicitly entails a form of exclusion and evaluation of others. *By saying who we are, we are also at the same time saying who we are not.*

Since groups are socially located, one must acknowledge the socio-cognitive dynamics involved in rooting such an identity in a larger socio-narrative framework. Every group has a story and participates in a larger narrative frame. In this regard it is interesting how 1 Peter expresses that the insiders were formerly ‘not God’s people’, as explained above (1 Pet 2:10), but that they are or have become God’s elected people, destined as such, although in reality scattered around the world in different places. It is important here to focus on the detail of the terms being used regarding the addressees. By calling them ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασποράς (those elected ones in the diaspora) in 1 Pet. 1:1, the author of 1 Peter is socio-cognitively appropriating the ‘identity-forming Jewish narrative of exile and diaspora’.<sup>6</sup> Those who are ‘elected and chosen’ presuppose a boundary and exclusion from those who are not chosen and elected. From this perspective, the chosen or called ones (2:9) are positioned within the larger story of Israel. This is a very important aspect since it creates a sense of proximity to Israel, if we take into consideration that elsewhere in the letter, they, as pagans, are described as formerly not being part of God’s people (2:10). The author in this way transcends the boundaries by claiming that former pagans are

6 Hunt, *1 Peter*, 527.



taken up by God into His story with His people. Todd D. Still and Natalie R. Webb also put it well when they argue that ‘in 1 Peter, these former “pagans” are swept up into Israel’s story in such a way that they become co-heirs (sole heirs?) of the promises made to Israel’.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the author of 1 Peter ‘appropriates the language that Scripture employs to depict Israel to describe and define the new Christian community’. This is also evident in several quotations of and allusions to the Old Testament by the author of 1 Peter who, as we can expect in a diaspora context, draws on the Septuagint (LXX) as Karen Jobes and others have shown (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:2–3 and LXX Ps. 34:8).<sup>8</sup>

*Birth as metaphor drawing new believers into a family narrative*<sup>9</sup>

In ancient times one could only become part of a family by birth or by adoption.<sup>10</sup> In 1 Pet. 1:3–12 the author describes in colourful language how those who believe have, as a result of God’s mercy, received (1:3 κατὰ τὸ πολὺ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος) new life possibilities by being born again (ἀναγεννήσας [new birth] based on Christ’s ἀναστάσεως [resurrection]).

Related to the *metaphor or image of birth*, 1 Peter says that believers have received an incorruptible *inheritance* (κληρονομίαν ἀφθαρτον in 1 Pet. 1:4). In the framework of the narrative of birth and inheritance, one would also expect to read about birth (1:23), children, a household, mutual familial love (1:22), and obedience (1:14). We find all these terms, and the cluster of

7 Todd D. Still and Natalie R. Webb, “Aliens” among “Pagans”, “Exiles” among “Gentiles”: Authorial Strategy and (Social) Identity in 1 Peter’, in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury), 455–72 (p. 459).

8 1 Pet. 1:24–25 clearly quotes Isaiah 40:6–8 from the LXX and does not follow the Masoretic text as evidenced in the omission of a phrase found in the latter and not in the former. See Karen Jobes, ‘The Septuagint Textual Tradition in 1 Peter’, in *Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Greek Jewish Scriptures* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 311–33.

9 It was Jan van der Watt’s approach to John in his book *Family of the King* (2000) which first influenced me on a heuristic level to see a similar cluster of images related to the birth of a new family in 1 Peter. J. G. Van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel According to John*, Biblical Interpretation Series, vol. 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

10 On the Christ-following community as fictive kinship group, see Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 1997). See also Philip F. Esler, ‘Keeping It in the Family: Culture, Kinship and Identity in 1 Thesalonians and Galatians’, in *Families and Family Relations as Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions*, ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Athalya Brenner (Leiden: Deo, 2000), 145–84. For a similar approach, see Van der Watt, *Family of the King* and Dirk G. van der Merwe, ‘Domestic Architecture: Culture, Fictive Kinship and Identity in the First Epistle of John’, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina*, 21, no. 2 (2010): 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10226486.2010.11879127>, who make use of family metaphors to describe the network of family imagery in the gospel and letters of John.

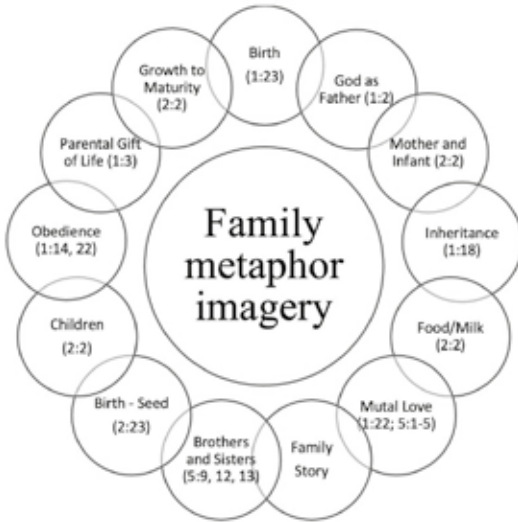


Figure 8.2 Family metaphor imagery (© Jacobus Kok)

images that relate to this metaphor of a new family of brothers and sisters (1 Pet. 1:22-23), in 1 Peter. In 1 Pet. 1:3 and 2:2, the old life is contrasted with the new life received. They are now like small children, and they are called upon to yearn for spiritual milk that will lead to their growth and salvation. By means of the metaphor of new birth, the author wants to express that the believers have a new identity and a new history and form a new group of people.<sup>11</sup> The cluster of metaphors associated with the metaphor of a family could be visually expressed as shown in Figure 8.2.

*A qualitatively superior family*

According to social identity theory (see Chapter 4 of this volume), insiders would often, in an effort to strengthen group identity, speak negatively about the outgroup by pointing to the superiority of the ingroup over and against the outgroup. For the author of 1 Peter, this new birth and inheritance belonging to the new family is qualitatively superior to earthly birth and inheritance since it is incorruptible and originated from heaven (ἐν οὐρανοῖς). It is then also from this macro-level perspective that a divine drama takes place, according to which God initiated the process that would lead to this new birth, the growth of the believers within this new household, and the unfolding of history from a macro perspective. The readers are thus caught up in and part of this cosmic narrative. In 1 Pet. 1:5 he refers to a salvation

11 Still and Webb, *Aliens*, 464.

which is still in the future and a glory which is still to be revealed. This narrative frame of identity and destiny binds the believers in a holy bond.<sup>12</sup> This places the persecution they might experience in this world into the perspective of the larger macro drama. This macro drama reframes the way in which they are to look at the things playing out in this world. Suffering in this world should be seen as a form of purification by fire *such* as that done unto gold (1 Pet. 1:7).

*Cultic language of ingroup bias and outgroup exclusion*

As mentioned already, claiming who we are, especially in terms which evaluate others and put the ingroup on the moral high ground, is typical of tendencies we see in social identity theory. By saying who we are, we are also saying who we are not. In 1 Peter, the believers are not only described as being a new family, as seen in the cluster of family metaphors used, but they are also described as being part of a *royal family*. They are described as being a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called into marvellous light, God's people, and recipients of God's grace (1 Pet. 2:10).

In the same context where 1 Peter expounds the identity of this (new) Royal family (1 Pet. 2:9–10), he also describes in 1 Pet. 2:11–12 the nature of a cosmic battle in which believers will find themselves to be aliens and exiles. He encourages them to abstain from 'passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul'. This creates a large socio-cognitive distance between the ingroup and outgroup. Just as priests and God's holy nation are set apart, they are also holy and set apart (cf. Exod. 19:5–6, 10–14), and in this way clear boundaries between the elevated ingroup and the outgroup (to which they once belonged) are being created.<sup>13</sup>

However, at the same time we also encounter a very important issue here, namely that the believers are encouraged to understand their own distinct, holy, or set-apart identity, but they are not called into sectarian dislocation from the world. Rather, they are called to express sensitivity to outsiders and do so with a missional intent. The boundaries are not solid but are like a 'semi-permeable cell', porous in nature (cf. 2:9; 3:15; 4:11); however, as Laura J. Hunt notes, 'The boundary is permeable, but only in one direction.'<sup>14</sup> Hunt expresses the nature of this dynamic well and is worth quoting here at length:

<sup>12</sup> See Hunt, *1 Peter*, 529.

<sup>13</sup> Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

The tension between outgroup stereotyping and porous boundaries continues as God's people are named 'aliens and exiles.' This naming has the effect of connecting the people once again to Israel's narrative (see above) and simultaneously of detaching them from their outgroup by naming it 'the gentiles' despite the likelihood that at least some of the Christians would have been characterized as such before they believed.<sup>15</sup>

The implication of this is that the Christ followers, as aliens and exiles, are still moving amongst people who belong to the category 'pagans' from the perspective of the insiders. They move and live amongst outsiders in their capacity as people who belong to a new, superior holy fictive kinship group but at the same time often still in their 'worldly' identities. What is important to see here from the perspective of dealing with cross-cutting identities is that this means that believers will inevitably be confronted with the challenge of how to manage their multiple, cross-cutting, or intersectional identities which require a form of social identity complexity management.<sup>16</sup>

#### *A new life in an old world*

Here we see the first interesting aspect of a form of social identity complexity being described which reflects a macro level of identity understanding: Firstly, there is a contrast and discontinuity with their old identity, and they are taken up in the larger narrative of God's ongoing story of his (Jewish) people. Secondly, there is a meso-identity reality which is seen in the dynamics involved amid the Petrine community that consisted of people from different layers of society in the context of a highly stratified ancient society. On the micro-level, the Petrine community is described as having amongst them people who are slaves (1 Pet. 2:18–20), wives and husbands in a patriarchal society (1 Pet. 3:1–6; 3:7), some who were wealthy (1 Pet. 3:3), and those who probably were heads of households (1 Pet. 5:1–5). Hunt is correct in pointing out that this means that we have here examples of *crosscutting identities*, which in this letter would receive much attention, as the author wants to guide the community not only in understanding their identity properly but also in functioning appropriately within the context and expectations of the positions in life they are in. Hunt remarks, 'Whereas the addressees have been used to thinking of themselves as Romans, or Jews or Galatians, the slave of this one, the wife of that one, the devotee of this deity, this letter attempts to redraw the boundaries such that, while still functioning in some of those

<sup>15</sup> Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

capacities, the people he is writing to begin to make salient their identity as the chosen slaves of God (2:16).<sup>17</sup> What is important to note here is that the author of 1 Peter presents the believers with new images and metaphors through which to see themselves in relation to God and others. He helps them to form a new socio-cognitive frame by means of new identity metaphors, which need to become the dominant or merger identity understanding overriding previous or other identity understandings. He certainly does not encourage them in the direction that would lead to compartmentalization nor to retraction from the world.<sup>18</sup> Their way of conduct is perhaps best summed up by 1 Peter 2:17, which might even have been a slogan amongst them, encouraging them to honour everyone (outsiders), love the family of believers (insiders), fear God (proper motivational basis and theology), and honour the emperor (submission to worldly authorities and structures).

#### *Conduct towards insiders and outsiders*

1 Peter encourages the ingroup to show love to fellow members (1:22; 5:1–5) and, as has been argued above, he uses, inter alia, kinship language to create a sense of social identity for the ingroup. The dominance of their new identity could lead to conflict with their context, with its different value system, and they could become objects of ridicule (1 Pet. 4:1, 4, 14). And for that reason, the believing ingroup might experience forms of suffering and even persecution (1 Pet. 4:12). In response to these difficult situations, they are encouraged to first understand their identity, and secondly to respond in ways that reflect their identity. This would include responding in ways characterized by non-violence and breaking the cycle of violence itself (1 Pet. 2:23; 3:9). Hunt has argued very convincingly that we see a directive to love for the ingroup (3:8; 2:17), on the one hand, and, remarkably, to submission to ‘every human institution’ which exists outside of the confines of the ingroup, on the other. This, as Hunt correctly sees, implies the reality of what she refers to as *intersectional crosscutting identities*.<sup>19</sup> The readers of 1 Peter are encouraged to not only accept but also submit to all authorities they happen to stand under (1 Pet. 2:13), be it the emperor or governors, in a way that honours all people (outgroup) and especially finds expression in love for brothers and sisters (ingroup) (1 Pet. 2:17 πάντας τιμήσατε, τὴν ἀδελφότητα ἀγαπάτε). It is

17 Hunt, *1 Peter*, 527.

18 On compartmentalization, see Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, ‘Social Identity Complexity Theory as Heuristic Tool in New Testament Studies’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–9 (p. 9), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2708>.

19 Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

very significant to see that the author of the letter accentuates the fact that believers are called to be obedient and submissive to the social structures of the day. And the author becomes very practical in this regard, helping the believers from different spheres of life to reflect on their identity and conduct in their capacity as slaves, wives, children, or husbands. Submission and honour (typical of ancient Mediterranean patriarchal cultures) should take place even amid suffering at the hands of those to whom one is called to submit.<sup>20</sup> It also has a strong witnessing character, in the sense that the author wants to guide the readers into taking an *intentional missional stance*. By this I mean that the submission to authorities and the ethos of non-retributive non-violence or the breaking of cycles of violence by respectful conduct are motivated by a particular identity and missional intention (in cultural context). By the missional intention, I mean that the desire is that all people will eventually be drawn into the confines of the ingroup as they too come to the point of acknowledging and receiving the grace of God. Just as the holiness and set-apartness of God their father exists not for the sake of itself but instead to reach people who are lost in the dark, so do believers as a holy priesthood family exist not for themselves but for outsiders as well. This missional intention is seen clearly if we again focus for a moment on the linguistic dimension evident in the text itself, as I will argue below.

From a social identity perspective, one could argue that believers are called upon to imitate the group prototype, which in this case is Jesus (1 Pet. 2:21; 4:1). They should imitate him and ‘walk as Jesus did’ even (perhaps especially) when they are experiencing unjust suffering. When they do experience such suffering, they are to remember their true identity as a holy people who are chosen and called by God from darkness into light and that they have received grace. They are to honour all people and love the insiders group. They are to conduct their lives in an exemplary fashion within their socio-cultural context and the cultural values within which they are called to live. One such example is that given to women who are living in the midst of what Hunt calls cross-cutting or intersectional identities.<sup>21</sup> We are here speaking of the challenge of managing a complexity of several identities. From a social-identity complexity perspective,<sup>22</sup> the author of 1 Peter wants the reader to understand that their in-Christ identity is the most important, salient, and over-arching identity that should serve as the motivational basis with which to manage

20 Note also the contrast with Acts 5:29 where obedience to God is contrasted with the rules of men.

21 Hunt, *1 Peter*, 533.

22 See Kok, *Social Identity Complexity Theory*, 1–4.

and interpret all other identities. In the case of the women being addressed in 1 Peter, the author states that wives should be submissive to their husbands as was expected of good women in that cultural context (1 Pet. 3:1ff). The author makes it clear that many of these husbands are in fact part of the outgroup, as can be seen in his description of them as being *without faith* or *disobedient to the word* (1 Pet. 3:1). If we look at the Greek more closely, we see the remarkable missional intention and sensitivity to outsiders being expressed by the author when he says that the wives' submission to their husbands must flow from their deep identity conviction but that it should eventually also result in a potential scenario in which their husbands might be won for the faith by the excellent, reverent, and chaste behaviour of their wives. In the Greek, 1 Peter 3:1–2 reads as is shown in Figure 8.3:

Greek NA 28	Translation NIV
Ὁμοίως αἱ γυναῖκες, ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, ἵνα καὶ εἴ τινες ἀπειθοῦσιν τῷ λόγῳ, διὰ τῆς τῶν γυναικῶν ἀναστροφῆς ἄνευ λόγου κερδηθῆσονται ἐποπτεύσαντες τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφήν ὑμῶν.	Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands <b>so that</b> , if any of them do not believe the word, <b>they may be won over</b> without words by the behaviour of their wives, <sup>2</sup> when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

Figure 8.3 1 Peter 3:1–2 in NA 28 and NIV

The structure of the sentence is interesting, as we can see from the subordinating conjunction ἵνα (so that) with its purposive force. The function of the conjunction ἵνα is to syntactically link the other constituents on a semantic level. Thus, the conduct of the women, qualified as respectful and pure in demeanour (ancient social patriarchal values), should lead to an outcome – namely that their unbelieving husbands might come to faith (ἵνα ... κερδηθῆσονται [so that ... they might be won over]). Thus, their behaviour is to have a missional-intentional purpose. This does not show us a picture of aliens and foreigners withdrawing or spiritually escaping from the world; rather, it depicts a people who are called to stay open to the world by not only conforming in exemplary terms to the *values of the host culture* but also by being open and inviting to the world. It is here where we could agree with Abraham Malherbe's point that 'the kinship language they used to describe their relationship to one another and the love they demonstrated in practical terms to each other would draw the jaundiced eye of their pagan despisers'.<sup>23</sup> Peter encourages women to not focus

23 Abraham Malherbe, 'Ethics in Context: The Thessalonians and their Neighbors', in *Sensitivity to Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship Between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament*

on lavish outward adornments but on inner beauty (1 Pet. 3:4).<sup>24</sup> As Ramsey Michaels has shown, this notion is also found in some Neopythagoreans such as Phintus and Perictione (cf. *On the Harmony of a Woman*, 153.10–14) and also in Plutarch (*Mor.* 141E; LCL 2.317–19) and Juvenal (*Satire* 6.457–65).<sup>25</sup> Michaels points out that even Jewish sources display the same sentiments (Isa. 3:18–24; Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 97).<sup>26</sup> However, Malherbe argues that although the early Christian sentiments might look similar to those found in some philosophical or moral texts in the *Umwelt*, the question remains as to what the differences are. In his opinion the identity understanding which underlies the *motivation* for particular actions was different.<sup>27</sup> For early Christians like those to whom the author of 1 Peter is writing, their identity as children of God, born into a new fictive kinship family and everything associated with that provided the identity and motivation for a particular kind of ethos towards insiders and outsiders. Malherbe has shown us that early Christian authors wrote to their readers ‘to explicate the theological rationale for Christian conduct’, that is, to help them understand their identity and ethos.<sup>28</sup>

In 1 Peter, the insiders are encouraged to live an exemplary life characterized by submission to the authorities and structures of the day (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:1–2; 4:13–14), show honour to outsiders, love insiders, fear God, and submit to the powers that be (1 Pet. 2:17) – all with a missional and witnessing intent.

## Conclusion and Relevance for Our Day

We live in a radically different cultural context from the one in which the New Testament originated. For us the message of 1 Peter, embedded in a paternalistic ancient Mediterranean cultural context, might in many cases be difficult to accept, for example, that wives should submit to their husbands, and so forth. But those who ‘live by the book’ can also read the text in a critical correlatory manner – that is, to first understand the text in its original socio-historical and cultural context, and then discern which values it wants to communicate and how to critically correlate that with present challenges.

*and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth, and Christopher M. Hays, WUNT II (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 187–208 (p. 207).

24 Values which were important in a patriarchal society, which rings very strangely in contemporary ears.

25 J. Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 49, 1 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 159.

26 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 159.

27 Malherbe, ‘Ethics in Context’, 205, 207.

28 Malherbe, ‘Ethics in Context’, 207.



Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte and Peter-Ben Smit<sup>29</sup> made me aware of the fact that 1 Peter's metaphor of 'aliens' and his use of family metaphors as described above most probably empowered the marginalized members of the new community of faith but at the same time subversively would have challenged those who were in a position of power. Those who were marginalized and who suffered received an alternative narrative frame and identity with which to endure suffering. However, those in positions of power had to renounce some of their privileges in the spirit of self-sacrificing love in service of the larger narrative in which they were embedded. But both these have in common the truth that early Christian identity and ethos wanted to empower and provide hope and life-giving possibilities. Those on the margins who suffered were given a frame of thinking with which to endure suffering and persecution. This had a liberating side to it in the sense that it inherently expected an immanent end or a good outcome in the end. But those who had power or privilege had the responsibility and call to sacrifice so that new possibilities of life could flow forth.

Miroslav Volf argues that Ernst Troeltsch (church vs sect) and Richard Niebuhr (Christ and culture) underplayed 1 Peter in their reflection on the relationship between church and culture. He argues that 1 Peter paints us a beautiful picture of exclusion, on the one hand, but solidarity and embrace (with the world), on the other.<sup>30</sup> Volf argues that 1 Peter calls not for self-serving justice but for Christian love in pursuit of justice. There is a fundamental difference. When justice is driven without love, then new forms of exclusion, marginalization, and violence are the result. In our superdiverse and individualist world, people are often driven by self-actualization at the expense of others. Volf sees in it two sides – on the one hand, such a drive is good for the self in fulfilling its goals, but essentially it is negative in the context where trust, negotiation, reconciliation, and bridge-building relationships should be found. From the perspective of 1 Peter, we saw that freedom (1 Pet. 2:16) is not a higher value than love. Therefore, freedom should always be tempered by love, for if not, it will rage war, exclude, and inflict violence.<sup>31</sup> It is love that breaks down boundaries and moves one from

29 On 27 January 2021 a Zoom meeting took place between Kok, Bakker, Lietaert Peerbolte, and Smit in which we critically discussed each other's papers and proposals. Some of these insights were a result of these fruitful discussions.

30 Volf, 'Soft Difference', 1–17.

31 I gained some of these ideas concerning Volf after having read the review of Volf's book by the Princeton scholar Ellen T. Charry (1999). See Ellen T. Charry, 'Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation; By Miroslav Volf; Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, 336 pp.', *Theology Today* 56, no. 2 (1999): 247–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369905600213>.

exclusion to embrace. This is also the inclusive message of 1 Peter, which Volf himself finds in the heart of this letter by one of Jesus's closest and most trusted followers and in the community that followed in his footsteps.

From the beginning, the new Jesus-following movement or 'sect' was 'strange' and 'foreign' to the world. From the beginning, it was a question of exclusion or inclusion/embrace in their cultural context. They also struggled with the question 'Was the world to be affirmed (inclusion) or was the world to be denied (exclusion)?' Volf is of the opinion, and I agree, that 1 Peter paints a picture of a movement that 'lived fearlessly her soft difference'.<sup>32</sup> The complexity of 1 Peter shows that the movement dealt with the reality of oppression in different forms, acutely aware of their rejection by and alienation in the world (exclusion), but that they nevertheless stayed open to the world (inclusivity) with a 'soft difference'. Volf says it best, and his words forms a good conclusion to this chapter:

She [the community/church of 1 Peter] was not surprised by the various reactions of individuals and communities among whom she lived because she was aware of the bewildering complexity of social worlds in which values are partly the same, partly different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory. And so it gradually became clear that the child who was born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into a living hope was not a sect at all. The unusual child who looked like a sect, but did not act like a sect, was a Christian community – a church that can serve as a model even for us today as we reflect on the nature of Christian presence in modern, rapidly changing, pluralistic societies that resist being shaped by moral norms.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Volf, 'Soft Difference', 27.

<sup>33</sup> Volf, 'Soft Difference', 27.



# 9 Hebrews, Deuteronomy, and Exclusion in the Early Church

*Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte*

## Abstract

Hebrews contains passages that warn against apostasy. Apostates are depicted as outsiders whose expected fate should caution insiders not to follow in their wake. This contribution analyses the socio-rhetorical function of these warning passages, especially the use of Deuteronomy in Hebrews 10, and, to trace early receptions of these passages, subsequently turns to a number of patristic authors, arguing that stricter and more lenient interpretations existed already in the early church. A brief analysis from the perspective of social identity theory underlines the initial presumption that rather than being legal rules, they are spiritual warnings, functioning rhetorically to keep the ranks of the believers closed.

**Keywords:** Hebrews, Deuteronomy, apostasy, patristic exegesis, social identity theory

## Introduction

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most complicated enigmas of the New Testament. Already in the third century, Origen famously said that only God knows who wrote this text.<sup>1</sup> The treatise (sermon?) has traditionally been attributed to Paul,<sup>2</sup> but modern scholarship agrees on the fact this is wrong: the vocabulary and style differ considerably from those of the undisputed Pauline epistles, theologically there is too little agreement

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.14.

<sup>2</sup> The King James Version mentioned Paul, though its modern revision refers to Timothy as author ('Written to the Hebrews from Italy, by Timothy').

between Hebrews and the undisputed Paulines, and it would not make sense for Paul to start each letter with an opening formula in which he explicitly states himself as author, while Hebrews is written anonymously.<sup>3</sup> Among the known characters of the early stages of the Christ movement, one of the most plausible potential authors is Apollos: an educated man from Alexandria, with clear rhetorical skills and well-versed in the Septuagint.<sup>4</sup> Plausible as it may seem, a positive identification cannot be made, and for this reason it is best to leave the question of the author of Hebrews undecided, as most commentators do. The nearness of Pauline ideas, the fact that Hebrews is recognizably present as source text in 1 Clement (written in 96 CE), and the fact that there is no allusion to the fall of the temple make for a probable date for the epistle in the 60s of the first century.

Hebrews is the harshest first-century Christian text in its verdict on apostasy.<sup>5</sup> In Hermut Löhr's reconstruction, some 30 percent of the text is dedicated to warnings and instruction.<sup>6</sup> The prime passage under discussion in this contribution is the severe warning issued in 10:26–31. There Hebrews makes use of Torah material to argue the point that repentance after apostasy is impossible. In 10:28 we find a quotation of LXX Deut. 17:6, and in 10:30 Hebrews refers to LXX Deut. 32:35–36. The fierce warning issued in these verses appears to echo two earlier passages in Hebrews, namely 2:2–3 and 6:4–12.<sup>7</sup> These warning passages have been quite influential throughout the history of the interpretation of Hebrews<sup>8</sup> and may be seen as crucial to the argument of Hebrews as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

The present contribution consists of three parts. In the first section, it focuses on Hebrews and its warning passages: how should we see the social

3 For the authorship of Hebrews, see Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 1–6; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), xlvii–xlviii; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 42–46.

4 According to Koester, Apollos was originally proposed as author by Luther. For references see Koester, *Hebrews*, 44, n. 90.

5 See esp. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 'Excursus: The Impossibility of Repentance for Apostates', 168–70; Koester, *Hebrews*, 20–21.

6 Hermut Löhr, *Umkehr und Sünde im Hebräerbrief*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 73 (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 74.

7 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, World Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 296.

8 Scot McKnight, 'The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions', *Trinity Journal*, New Series 13 (1992): 21–59; B. J. Oropeza, 'The Warning Passages in Hebrews: Revised Theologies and New Methods of Interpretation', *Currents in Biblical Research* 10 (2011): 81–100.

9 Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 280: 'The exhortation in 10:19–39 plays a central role in relationship to all the other hortatory sections in Hebrews.'

setting of Hebrews and what is it exactly that the text warns against? The second part of this contribution looks into the early reception of Hebrews and asks how the exclusion mechanism provided by this text was understood in the early church. In the third and final part, a brief analysis will be given of the exclusion mechanism proposed by Hebrews from the perspective of social identity theory, and the contribution will close by concluding that the exclusion texts in Hebrews should be read as socio-rhetorical attempts to strengthen the boundaries of a group that sees itself as a christologically defined form of Israel.

### Hebrews' Warning Against Apostasy

In Hermut Löhr's analysis of Hebrews, the most significant warning passages in this epistle are 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:3; 9:12; 10:19–25, 32–39; 12:1–17, 25–29, and large parts of chapter 13. He adds that the text under discussion in this contribution is thus framed by warning passages.<sup>10</sup> Scot McKnight makes a somewhat different selection and focuses on 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39, and 12:1–29.<sup>11</sup> Since an overall analysis of Hebrews' exhortations is neither necessary nor possible for the present purpose, it may suffice to focus on 2:1–4, 6:1–8 first before arriving at the passage in which Hebrews refers to Deuteronomy in an attempt to draw a clear boundary and announce divine judgement over apostates (10:26–31). It is left unmentioned whether these apostates should be expelled from the community, but implicitly it seems likely that apostasy would lead to the lapsed faithful leaving. So, although these warnings seem to leave the judgement to God, they do certainly intend to other the fallen faithful. Rhetorically, the reference to their harsh fate functions as a warning to the remaining believers: you have to stay faithful or else you will share in the verdict of the apostates.

In 2:1–4 the author turns to his audience and instructs the listeners with regard to remaining inside the group of Christ followers:

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard

<sup>10</sup> Löhr, *Umkehr und Sünde*, 74, n. 322. The first 'Bußtext' is 6:4–8.

<sup>11</sup> McKnight, 'Warning Passages', 22.

him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.<sup>12</sup>

As McKnight has convincingly argued, the issue at stake here, as in the other two passages we will discuss, is apostasy.<sup>13</sup> Hebrews argues in an elaborate and eloquent fashion that the Mosaic covenant was mediated by angels, whereas the new covenant in Christ is unmediated, delivered directly by God, or rather, the Son of God (cf. Heb. 1:1–4). The mediation of the covenant on Sinai by angels is in fact an existing Jewish motif, which already made its way into the LXX of Deut. 33:2 and is also presupposed by Paul in Gal. 3:19.<sup>14</sup> The use of the verb *παρῳρέω* (drift away) in 2:1 suggests that the author instructs his audience to remain steadfast in their faith. Verse 2 refers to the punishments prescribed by the Torah for all kinds of sin and understands these punishments as secondary to what will happen once ‘we neglect so great a salvation’ – in other words, commit the sin of apostasy. It is clear that Hebrews intentionally draws a boundary between the ingroup and anyone outside of that group and instructs the members of the ingroup to remain where they are, inside the group of followers of Jesus Christ.

As said, the instruction in 2:1–4 does not stand alone. It is repeated, in another formulation, in 6:4–8:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt. Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.

In the preceding verses (6:1–3), Hebrews summarizes the fundamental characteristics of what it is like to live as a Christian: ethical behaviour

12 Biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

13 McKnight, ‘Warning Passages’, 58 concludes, ‘First, the *only* sin that can separate the believer from final salvation is the sin of apostasy’ (italics original). See also Christian Hornung, *Apostasie im antiken Christentum: Studien zum Glaubensabfall in altkirchlicher Theologie, Disziplin und Pastoral (4.-7. Jahrhundert n. Chr.)*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 138 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 88–96.

14 See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 64–65; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 37 for further references.

(repentance from dead works), a faithful relationship with God, baptism, laying on of hands, the expectation of the eschatological resurrection, and judgement. Where baptism and the laying on of hands can be seen as rituals for entering the group of Christ, the first two elements are apparently vital regarding the eschatological destiny of Christians. According to Hebrews, Christians may expect to take part in the resurrection and be vindicated at the final judgement if they behave in a proper fashion and put their faith in God.<sup>15</sup> The impossibility of restoration, with which 6:4 opens (ἀδύνατον!), for those who have lapsed has caused considerable discussion: is God unable to do this or unwilling? The latter would seem the correct option, and thus Hebrews is convinced that God will not accept any *lapsi* back.<sup>16</sup>

The harshness of Hebrews' rejection of apostates is repeated in 10:26–31, this time underpinned by three quotations from Deuteronomy:

For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses'. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In his commentary on Hebrews, William Lane indicates the agreements between the two passages. According to Lane, 6:4–8 describes four stages: '(1) the experience of Christian life (6:4–5); (2) the fact of apostasy (6:6); (3) the recognition that renewal is impossible (6:4, 6); (4) the imposition of the curse sanctions of the covenant (6:8).'<sup>17</sup> Lane continues by indicating that the exact same stages can be discerned in 10:26–29 and rightly concludes that the two passages are 'complementary declarations'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> McKnight, 'Warning Passages', 55, concludes that Hebrews speaks about 'conditional salvation' but hastens to add 'that the condition is a condition taught throughout the Bible'.

<sup>16</sup> See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 167–70. Koester, *Hebrews*, 312–13, argues that there are three possibilities for interpreting the 'impossible' of 6:4: 1) 'Impossible for an apostate to repent', 2) 'impossible for other Christians to restore an apostate, 3) 'impossible that God should restore an apostate to repentance', and opts for the third.

<sup>17</sup> Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 296.

<sup>18</sup> Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 296.



One important difference, however, between 6:4–8 and 10:26–29 is the use of scriptural arguments in the latter passage. Verse 28 contains a quotation from Torah: ‘on the testimony of two or three witnesses’. Even though the words do not correspond verbatim with the text of the LXX, Deut. 17:6 is clearly referred to here: ἐπὶ δυσὶν μάρτυσιν ἢ ἐπὶ τρισὶν μάρτυσιν ἀποθάνειται ὁ ἀποθνήσκων.

The fact that this verse in Deuteronomy stipulates the testimony of two or three witnesses as decisive in matters of life and death comes back in Deut. 19:15, where the same principle is stated. It is later elaborated in rabbinic sources, where it appears as a standard element in legal procedures (see, e.g. Sif.Deut. 188; Sot. 2b; Sanh. 30a; Yad, Eduṭ 5:1).

In the current context, however, the emphasis is not on the two or three witnesses but rather on the harshness of the text. In verse 29 it becomes clear that the text is referred to only to make an *a fortiori* argument: if this is already the case in Torah, then how much worse will the punishment be for apostates? The implication is that death, of which Deut. 17:6 speaks, is not the worst possible penalty, but a worse fate awaits the apostate. The exact nature of that fate is not explained, but the two quotations in verse 30 do imply that it is God himself who will exact punishment on the apostates.

Deut. 32:35 and 36 are being referred to in a slightly different version from that which the modern critical text of the LXX has. Harold Attridge indicates that the wording differs not only from the LXX but also from the MT, although the words in Hebrews do have parallels in targumic texts and in Paul.<sup>19</sup> The context in Hebrews changes the meaning of the first quotation, however, since in the context of Deuteronomy, it is YHWH’s judgement of the nations, the Gentiles, that is announced with these words, whereas in Hebrews the object of God’s judgement will be the apostates. The addition of Deut. 32:36 indicates that God’s verdict will also concern the believers who did stay inside the church.

Now where does all this leave us? The strict position of Hebrews on apostasy is clear: whoever sins by turning their back on Christ loses their life with God. The first conclusion may thus be that Hebrews refers to Deuteronomy in order to underpin a very strict policy of othering apostates in order to rhetorically summon potential apostates not to sin.

That this exclusion policy does not stand on its own was argued by Göran Forkman in his 1972 Lund dissertation.<sup>20</sup> Forkman references several

19 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 296; cf. also C. Spicq, *L'épître as Hébreux*, vol. II – *Commentaire* (Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 325–26.

20 Göran Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity* (Lund:

early Christian texts that deal with the same phenomenon, notably Matt. 18:15–17, 2 Thess. 3:6–15, 1 Cor. 5:3–5, 1 John 5:16–17, and Revelation 2–3. The Jewish parallels Gorkman mentions indicate that this Christian exclusion mechanism was deeply rooted in *halakhic* Jewish traditions, but the reasons for expelling believers from the Christ community are clearly different. Interestingly enough, Matt. 18:15–17 contains the same legal element that Heb. 10:30 refers to, viz. the presence of two or three witnesses. This indicates that the instructions in Hebrews are not an isolated case of acting against apostasy but are perhaps rather a stricter version of the ways in which the early Christian movement dealt with sinners within its own confines. In Forkman's analysis the harsh words of Heb. 10:26–31 are related to the ban on sinning against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28–29; Matt. 12:31–32; Luke 12:10 [see also 1 John 5:16]).<sup>21</sup> Forkman also indicates that 'in Heb. ... the covenant motif seem[s] to be connected with the limits of the community'.<sup>22</sup> The conclusion should be drawn that Hebrews, on the one hand, offers the sharpest rebuke concerning apostasy of all first-century Christian writings, but on the other hand, this rebuke is firmly rooted in both Jewish ideas and practices of the time and does not form an isolated case within the developing Christian movement.<sup>23</sup> The instructions examined above would become influential in the early church, and for that reason it is now time to turn to some patristic receptions.

### Some Patristic Receptions of Hebrews

One of the most difficult problems in tracing the reception history of a text is that a theme is often taken up by later authors in ways that seem to allude to a specific text, but without explicitly quoting the text. Under normal circumstances this leaves serious room for doubt as to whether we can list such a discussion under the heading of reception history of a certain text. In this case, however, the situation is different. Hebrews is the only first-century Christian document, both within and outside the canon, to explicitly state that return after apostasy is impossible. In all cases where the fathers discuss this problem, the assumption is warranted that they

CWK Gleerup, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> Forkman, *Limits*, 176.

<sup>22</sup> Forkman, *Limits*, 193.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 293–94, who argues that 10:28 'may represent a Christian adaptation of a commonplace of synagogue homiletics'.

were familiar with the instructions from Hebrews, and these instructions formed part of an implicit conversation on the fate of apostates.

### Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, who was in charge of the catechetical school of Alexandria in the late second century, discusses the fate of the sinner in his *Stromateis* 2.13.56–57. He explains here how sinners can always turn to God and be forgiven, because that is the nucleus of the gospel. The Lord knows what human beings are like and for that reason is willing to forgive them for their sins. He then goes on to discuss the fate of those who have come to faith and converted and yet continue to sin. Here he makes a distinction between involuntary sins and consciously committed sins, and his verdict on the latter category is directly dependent upon Hebrews:

So in his great mercy he gave yet another chance of repentance to those who, despite their faith, fall into some form of disharmony, so that if anyone should, after their calling, fall into temptation and be forced or tricked into sin, they may have one more chance of ‘a repentance that brings no regret’. ‘For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins but a fearful prospect of judgement and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.’ Continual and repeated repentance for sins is no different from those who have once and for all turned away from faith, except alone in the consciousness of sin.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘repentance that brings no regret’ is clearly a reference to 2 Cor. 7:10 and the ‘fearful prospect of judgement’ to Heb. 10:27. Thus, in his discussion of the fate of sinners, Clement comes to make a distinction based on the opening word of Heb. 10:26, *ἐκούσιως*: if someone commits a conscious sin against the Son of God, it cannot be pardoned, but when sinners fall back into their pre-conversion pattern of behaviour, forgiveness can be applied.

### Origen

According to Erich Grässer, Origen’s interpretation of the warning passages of Hebrews became authoritative for the entire Christian tradition.<sup>25</sup> In Origen’s

<sup>24</sup> Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT10 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005), 164.

<sup>25</sup> Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 3 vols., Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zürich: Benzinger Verlag; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), vol. 3, 53.

discussion of the problem of apostates, he makes an important and perhaps innovative exegetical move. According to him, the warning of Heb. 10:26–27 refers to Jesus’s words concerning the sin against the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 12:31–32). He compares the apostates to the category of people mentioned by Jesus in Luke 9:62: ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ (NRSV). The best thing that potential apostates can do, according to Origen, is take refuge with Christ.<sup>26</sup> Origen’s *Homilies on Jeremiah* 13.2 makes an interesting exegetical connection between Heb. 6:4, 10:29, and Jer.15:6. After quoting the two verses from Hebrews, Origen explains that the warnings of Hebrews should prevent the believers from falling away so that the word of Jer. 15:6 will not be addressed to them: ‘You have rejected me, says the Lord, you are going backward; so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you.’<sup>27</sup>

In his *Homilies on Leviticus* 11.2.4, Origen explains that the gospel does not contain any punishment measures for adulterers, unlike the Law of Moses, and explains this difference by emphasizing the *a fortiori* argument made in Hebrews: if that is the punishment measured out for adulterers in the Law, how much worse will the punishment of those be who deny Christ? In Origen’s words, ‘For this reason, we brought forth the word of Paul, saying above: “How much worse punishment will be deserved by one who has spurned the Son of God”, etc. Hear, therefore, how neither was the law cruel, nor does the gospel now appear dissolute because of the abundance of mercy, but in both instances the benevolence of God is held in a different dispensation.’<sup>28</sup> Although Origen coined the dictum that only God knows who wrote Hebrews, here he apparently did seem to think it was Paul. Elsewhere Origen explains how falling back into sin reinvigorates the ‘ancient reproaches’ against the believer, and again he refers to Hebrews 10 (*Homilies on Joshua* 5.6).<sup>29</sup>

In his *Commentary on Matthew* 114, Origen uses a similar reference to Hebrews 10. He discusses Peter’s denial of Jesus in the courtyard of Caiaphas’s palace, and here he explains that Peter’s behaviour symbolizes the kind of betrayal that can be forgiven. He merges Heb. 10:27 into the text of Matthew and thus concludes,

26 Koester, *Hebrews*, 20.

27 See Pierre Husson and Pierre Nautin, eds., Origène, *Homélie sur Jérémie*, Sources chrétiennes 238 (Paris: Cerf, 1977), 58.

28 See Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, eds., *Hebrews*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 10 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005), 166.

29 Annie Jaubert, ed., Origène, *Homélie sur Josué*, Sources chrétiennes 71 (Paris: Cerf, 1960), 172.

Perhaps all people when they deny Jesus...seemingly deny him before the crowing of the cock, when the sun of justice has not yet risen for them and its rising is not yet at hand. But if upon the rising of the sun for the soul 'we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins but a fearful prospect of judgement and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries'.<sup>30</sup>

Other examples may be mentioned, but this is enough to indicate how Origen deals with the warnings from Hebrews: he takes them very seriously. Hebrews seems to have caused a theological tradition that excludes from the community believers who have come to sin against the Holy Spirit and deny Jesus as the Son of God.

### John Chrysostom and Later

In the fourth century, after Christianity became a *religio licita* under Constantine and received imperial support, the discussions of inclusion and exclusion reached another level. John Chrysostom grants us a fascinating insight into a discussion concerning baptism, repentance, and salvation in his commentary on Hebrews. He explains how there are two factions in this conversation. On the one hand, there are those who argue that baptism should be delayed, since once a person is baptized, the risk of being excommunicated because of committing a sin is a real threat for that person's salvation. On the other hand, there is the group of people who are critical of accepting sinners to 'the mysteries' – most likely of the eucharist – if there is no possibility of remission. Chrysostom analyses the situation as follows:

The Lord does not thrust away or cast down those who are fallen into despair. Nor does he take away repentance of the propitiation itself through an act of repentance. He is not thus an enemy of our salvation. But what means 'no longer'? He takes away the second washing. For he did not say that no more is there repentance or no more is there remission, but 'no longer' is there a 'sacrifice'; that is, there is no need for a second cross. For this is what he means by sacrifice. 'For by a single offering', he says, 'he has perfected for all time those that are sanctified', unlike the

30 *Origenes: Matthäuserklärung*, ed. Erich Klostermann, Ernst Wilhelm Benz, and Ursula Treu, Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 38, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976), 238; translation Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT1B (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2002), 270.

Jewish rites. For this reason he has so consistently shown, concerning the sacrifice, that it is one, and only one. This calls us to be more steadfast.<sup>31</sup>

Later in his exposition of Hebrews, Chrysostom explains how believers are caused to stumble: it is the devil who hurts them, who causes them to suffer losses, and who thus makes them turn away from God and Christ by blaspheming.<sup>32</sup> The warning in Hebrews not to become an apostate is thus interpreted basically as a warning not to fall into the traps of the devil. In connection with the discussion on baptism and the remission of sins, the evidence from Chrysostom indicates that in the second half of the fourth century, there was clearly a perception that believers inside the Church were living in another realm of reality than that of the outside world. The outside world is ruled by the devil, the inside world by the Spirit of God. Chrysostom's rhetoric, not just in the example offered here but also elsewhere, aims at strengthening the boundaries between the two realms.<sup>33</sup>

In the fifth century, bishop Theodoret of Cyr gives an exposition of Hebrews in which he clearly tries to tone down the instructions of Hebrews. It is worth quoting him on this:

Now, it was not that he was ruling out repentance in these statements; rather, he was claiming there is no second sacrifice: our Lord was immolated for us once and for all. He used the term *deliberately* to emphasize that what is done against our free will enjoys a degree of pardon.<sup>34</sup>

Theodoret thus indicates that unintentional sins do not lead to the harsh exclusion proposed by Hebrews. This line of interpretation is picked up later by Oecumenius, who presents a similar argument:

He did not speak of people who have sinned, but he addressed the reckless and desired to admonish those who wish to remain in sin until the end.

31 Chrysostom, *On the Epistle to the Hebrews* 20.2, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT10, 166.

32 Chrysostom, *On the Epistle to the Hebrews* 10.7–8, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT10, 167–68.

33 Augustine continues the line of thought that we found in Chrysostom: it is the devil who causes believers to fall. He elaborates this idea in his *De Civitate Dei* and stipulates a distinction between the *civitas dei* and the *civitas diaboli*. Apostasy is caused by the devil, and the believers who fall from their faith are his victims. The exclusion texts from Hebrews do not play a major role in Augustine's work. Cf. Hornung, *Apostasie*, 125–47.

34 Theodoret, *Interpretation of Hebrews*, 10, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT10, 166.

Hence it is especially clear that he does not destroy the possibility of repentance.<sup>35</sup>

These last two fragments clearly indicate that later interpreters saw the hard line proposed by Hebrews as problematic.

## Scripture, Exclusion, and Social Identity Theory

After surveying several early interpretations of the warnings in Hebrews, it is time to weigh the evidence and come to a final analysis of these exclusion passages. The theological impact of the exclusion warnings in Hebrews is clear: these warnings have been interpreted in a variety of ways throughout history, sometimes in a very strict sense, sometimes more in more lenient ways.<sup>36</sup> It seems justifiable, however, for the current volume to approach these texts from a different angle and to read them from the perspective of social identity theory.<sup>37</sup> This theoretical approach has recently grown in popularity in the field of New Testament studies, and for good reason. It is able to analyse and explain literary phenomena in ancient texts from a social-scientific approach. Steven Muir, for example, sought to approach Hebrews through this lens and gave the following analysis of the epistle.<sup>38</sup> The first step in his argument is to identify the audience to which the epistle was addressed. In Muir's view this should be identified as a mixed audience, consisting of both Jewish and pagan followers of Christ.<sup>39</sup> The three most important aspects of social identity formation Muir distinguishes are 1) group formation, 2) intragroup formation, and 3) intergroup formation. In other words: 1) How is the group established? 2) How does the group maintain and strengthen its inner bonds? and 3) How does the group relate to other groups?

35 Oecumenius, *Fragments on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 10.26, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT10, 166.

36 See, e.g. Oropeza, 'Warning Passages'.

37 The same theory is applied in the contributions by Jack Barentsen (Chapter 4) and Kobus Kok (Chapter 8) in this volume.

38 Steven Muir, 'Social Identity in the Epistle to the Hebrews', in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 425–39.

39 Muir, 'Social Identity', 430. See also C. Adrian Thomas, *A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews* (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006) (also published under the same title by Peter Lang, New York, 2008).

It is difficult to say much about how the group addressed in Hebrews was established, but this much is clear: that the unknown author refers a number of times to

early proclamations, teachings and instructions which likely formed group identity (2.1, 3; 4.2; 5.11; 6.1), early feelings of group confidence and solidarity (3.14), early acts of confessions and expressions of group belief (4.15; 10.23), a distinctive term to describe the state following instruction (enlightenment, φωτισθέντας), early titles of group identity (sons, 12.5; strangers and foreigners 11.13-14; 13.14), common experiences of persecution, trials and ordeals (10.32-34), and early group actions (charity, 6.10).<sup>40</sup>

It can thus be surmised that the group had lived through many common experiences, and these experiences shaped the social memory of the group.

Regarding intragroup formation, the rhetoric of Hebrews seems to aim at establishing exactly this: by rhetorically shaping the boundaries of the group and by warning the members of the group not to fall away from the path chosen, the social cohesion of the group should be strengthened. Muir's analysis of the rhetoric of Hebrews shows how inner cohesion is the main aim of the epistle:

The author employs a complex, paraenetic framework in his discussion of social actions and attitudes within the group. He encourages particular things and discourages others. His encouragements are intended to foster group unity and establish (or re-establish) social norms, and his discouragements are meant to forestall people from drifting into factions or even out of the group. In these things, the author uses a nimble 'do this ... don't do that' style which is appropriate for a sermon.<sup>41</sup>

This seems to be a correct approach, especially to the exclusion passages of Hebrews. They should be seen as paraenetic warnings in a sermon, not as tenets or instructions for an ecclesial code of law. The warnings in Hebrews are addressed to readers inside the church and warn them against the fate of those who committed apostasy. The harsh words concerning the apostates are therefore to be seen as warnings addressed to those who have not yet fallen away rather than as a judgement of those who have. The *lapsi* and their fate, as expected by the author of Hebrews, are described the way

40 Muir, 'Social Identity', 432, n. 14.

41 Muir, 'Social Identity', 433.



they are in order to close the ranks of those who are still among the Christ followers. In a sense, this is a rhetorical strategy of othering those who have already fallen to prevent those who have not from doing so.

Muir's analysis of intergroup formation in Hebrews underpins that this is indeed the correct way to interpret these particular passages. He emphasizes that Hebrews rhetorically compares its audience to other groups by referring to aspects of their past, but also by using the Jewish scriptures.<sup>42</sup> By comparing Christ with Abraham, Moses, Melchizedek, and the angels – characters known from the Jewish Bible – the author of Hebrews places himself and his group both inside Jewish history and also in competition with it. This socio-rhetorical dynamic accounts for the argument in Heb. 10:26–31 and the ways in which Deuteronomy is referred to here: the legal mechanism of two or three witnesses prescribed in Deuteronomy as well as the exclusivist claim to divine vengeance are both part of the past and still valid. In this sense, Hebrews perhaps offers an indication of the hermeneutics of later Christianity that would both continue to read the Jewish Bible, as the Old Testament, and claim a new, christologically defined context for it.

## Conclusion

The conclusion to this analysis should thus be the following. The epistle to the Hebrews uses a rhetorical strategy for othering 'fallen' members of the group of Christ followers and displays them as the ultimate example not to follow. Their fate is described, although in implicit terms, as an example of the fate a true follower of Christ should not want to share. Hebrews positions Christ and his followers within the tradition of Israel, even to such a degree that this history of Israel is seen as reaching its apex in Christ. It thus poses a claim with regard to Israel: Christ is the fulfilment of its history, and without Christ there is no Israel. This claim also works in the other direction: gentiles who follow Christ become part of Israel and thus leave their gentile identity behind. Hebrews depicts the ingroup of Christ followers in terms of the climax of Israel and warns the believers, those who are members of that ingroup, to remain inside the group. The fate of the apostates is depicted as the ultimate example of how not to behave. The warning passages in Hebrews are thus to be seen as a rhetorical tool to keep insiders inside the community. By this choice, Hebrews has forced a twofold legacy upon later Christianity. On the one hand, it has to find a way

42 Muir, 'Social Identity', 434–36.

to deal with insiders who fall outside the group and leave the community. On the other hand, it contributes to the problem of substitution theology: Hebrews helped create a discourse in which Christianity could present itself as superseding Judaism. The negative effects of that discourse are visible throughout the history of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, with the most horrible climax imaginable in the twentieth century: the Shoah. Notwithstanding these two problematic characteristics of Christianity which Hebrews contributed to through its warnings discourse, the epistle gives us a wonderful example of how the othering of unwanted behaviour can function as a means of preventing that behaviour from becoming popular in the community to which the epistle was addressed.

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# 10 ‘Idolatry’ in Rabbinic Discussion: To Destroy, to Bury or Something Else? Some Observations on the Subject of ‘Idolatry’ in Rabbinic Questions and Answers on the Internet

*Leo Mock*

## **Abstract**

This contribution focuses on the role of the concept of idolatry in the discourse of some contemporary orthodox rabbis on the Internet who belong to the Religious Zionism movement in Israel – the most important centre of contemporary orthodox Jewish life. Does the concept of idolatry, either as literary rhetoric or theological conviction, have traction in modern and contemporary contexts? Beginning with an overview of the attitude towards idolatry in Rabbinic Judaism in different and changing historical and socio-religious contexts, from the Bible, the Second Temple era to late antiquity, medieval Rabbinic Judaism, and Modernity, the attitude towards this concept in the modern world is assessed through the medium of internet responsa, a relatively new phenomenon of the past two decades.

**Keywords:** idolatry, Rabbinic Judaism, Rabbinic responsa, Religious Zionism, religious identity

An important theme in biblical theology is the rejection of idolatry and its worshippers. Harsh critique is levelled against certain nations as being ‘contaminated’ by idol worship and supposed moral flaws. The coupling of idolatry and low morals is part of biblical rhetoric and continued in rabbinic literature. In particular, the descendants of Ham – Noah’s rejected son – are charged by Rabbinic literature with both accusations: idolatry

and moral imperfection, attributed to both Egypt and the seven Canaanite nations.<sup>1</sup> In the Deuteronomic vision and its tradition (e.g. 1 and 2 Kings) – but not necessarily in the perception of Genesis<sup>2</sup> – an uncompromising battle should be waged against idolatry and its symbols and worshippers. Other nations and their descendants – from among the progeny of Shem – such as Edom, Yishmael, Moab, and Midian are considered to cherish low moral standards but not necessarily idolatrous behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Some biblical stories in fact depict some personalities from these nations as being righteous: Ruth the Moabite and Jethro the High Priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses. The descendants of Jethro the Kenite are even given permission to settle themselves in the Promised Land among the Israelites (Judg. 1:16). We may tentatively surmise that religious rituals and affiliations to other nations do not always and automatically lead to moral depravity – at least not on the individual level.

### Prophetic Tradition

The prophetic tradition of the Bible frequently admonishes idolatry and its rituals, both among the heathen nations and among Israel itself. These are recurrent themes and are found, inter alia, in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea. In the Second Temple era, the Jewish religious attitude towards idolatry was – at least as suggested in literary sources – by and large harsh and uncompromising. This is attested by, for example, the Book of Jubilees, Josephus, and Philo of Alexandria, even to the point of following the Biblical obligation to destroy idolatrous symbols, as the Maccabees did. Archaeology, however, shows a different picture, with small figurines found in the land of Israel/Palestine from the biblical period, with inscriptions that refer to 'JHWH and his Asherah', and figurative frescos and mosaic floors with pagan themes (Helios) in synagogues of the third and fourth centuries of the common era and continuing during the Byzantine period. These archaeological data may remind us of the character of literary sources as '*Tendenzliteratur*', not necessarily as a mirror of reality.

1 See for example Sifra Parasha 8, ch. 12 § 8 on Lev. 18:3.

2 See, e.g. the respectful encounter between Abraham and the descendants of Het in Gen. 23:7–18 and the attitude of Jacob towards the idols that are buried below the oak in Gen. 35:1–4.

3 It is in fact the later rabbinic tradition that imports the pagan element into the biblical stories about the descendants of Shem (e.g. Terah, the father of Abraham), see Gen. Rabbah 38:13.

## Idolatry in Contemporary Texts?

At first glance, idolatry is an archaic concept of religions of the past that uses the term for all other religions and/or possibly also for deviant behaviour from those 'inside', mimicking in some way the biblical rhetoric as outlined above. Recent decades have seen the rapid realization of modern technological innovations and digital means of communication. Is idolatry still a relevant theological concept in Judaism in terms of relating to the religious other? In the context of orthodox Judaism, contemporary texts are shaped by different historical-theological perspectives: the Shoah has constituted a caesura in orthodox Judaism, as important communities and their institutions, persons, and part of their heritage were wiped out. Retrieving the tradition may, from this perspective, seem mandatory. Moreover, a reaction to modernity and its secular tendencies may prompt conservative tendencies. Another important influential historic event is the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. For the first time since (late) antiquity, Jews were to become a majority again in a state with citizens (or foreigners) of religions other than Judaism – mostly Christianity and Islam. Both historic events have led on the part of the church – Protestant and Catholic (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965) – to a revised (theological) view of Judaism and Jews. The concept of idolatry no longer serves to condemn (some) non-Christians. Instead, there is a process of dialogue that continues until today. Reflection upon the concept of idolatry might be central for a possible renewed religious Jewish perspective on modern society.

## Actualities

The role of the term and the concept of idolatry in contemporary orthodox discourse could possibly be relevant from the perspective of recent events in Israel, where negative incidents involving church buildings, clergy, and other Christian symbols and compounds have taken place. Christian clergy complained about being spat at by young Jewish orthodox men (2009), anti-Christian graffiti appeared on the Baptist church in Jerusalem (2013), arson took place at the Dormition Abbey in the Old City of Jerusalem (2014 and graffiti in 2015), and there was an arson attack at the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes in Galilea (Northern Israel, July 2015).<sup>4</sup>

4 These incidents were variously reported in the Times of Israel and can be found as follows: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/church-official-vexed-after-case-against-suspected-monastery-vandals-dropped/>, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>

A deeper analysis of these incidents is needed, however, to determine the exact role of religious motives and the possibility that political-ideological and social factors also came into play, or even constituted a more dominant factor. Moreover, in some religious media on the Internet, a negative attitude can be observed in the halachic views of some rabbis concerning issues like using the Christian era in the calendar dating, the burning of the Notre Dame church as a punishment for the burning of the Talmud in Paris (1242), the prohibition of visiting the Vatican Museums and attending the Jerusalem Festival of Light (forbidden – churches and Muslim places are lit up too, which emphasizes the supposedly wrong message of a holy city of three faiths). These are some examples of an apparently less tolerant attitude towards Christianity.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these opinions are all based on the views of one Religious Zionist rabbi, Shlomoh Aviner, but somewhat similar statements on Christianity by a number of other rabbis may be found on some orthodox internet sites as well.<sup>6</sup>

## Rabbinic Judaism

Before we get to the discourse on idolatry in the modern period, a short description of the attitude of Rabbinic Judaism in late antiquity and the Middle Ages towards idolatry is necessary. With the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and the failed and fatal uprising

one-convicted-another-acquitted-for-arson-attack-on-jesus-loaves-church/, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/attack-on-jerusalem-graves-unnerves-christians/>, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-christian-graffiti-scrawled-on-jerusalem-monastery/>. See also L. Derfner, 'Mouths filled with hatred', *The Jerusalem Post*, 26 November 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Mouths-filled-with-hatred>. All accessed 13 May 2021.

5 These examples from Rabbi S. Aviner were published on the websites of Srugim.co.il and Kipa.co.il – both important websites for Religious-Zionist Judaism – and can be found as follows: On the fire in the Notre-Dame, 16 April 2019, <https://www.srugim.co.il/332395-האם-יש-להצטער-כעבודה-זרה-134981>, <https://www.srugim.co.il/149632-הקואליציה-של-הניאור-רפורמים-והשמאל-הדת-שימוש-בתאריך-הנוצרי-מוגדר-כעבודה-זרה-134981>. Concerning visiting the Light Festival in the Old City of Jerusalem that highlights the different religious buildings there, 30 May 2016, <https://www.srugim.co.il/149632-הקואליציה-של-הניאור-רפורמים-והשמאל-הדת-שימוש-בתאריך-הנוצרי-מוגדר-כעבודה-זרה-134981>. On using the Gregorian calendare date, 01 January 2016, <https://www.srugim.co.il/134981-הקואליציה-של-הניאור-רפורמים-והשמאל-הדת-שימוש-בתאריך-הנוצרי-מוגדר-כעבודה-זרה-134981>. On entering the Vatican Museum, 18 May 2017, <https://www.kipa.co.il/היהדות/שות-סמס-האם-מותר-להיכנס-למוזיאון-של-הו>. All accessed 27 May 2021.

6 See, for example, the following two questions and answers on the website of the Beth El Yeshiva Center, Rabbi Ro'i Margalit, 'Entering a Non-Catholic Place of Worship', Tammuz 23, 5764 (2004), <https://www.yeshiva.co/ask/1509>, Rabbi Chaim Tabasky, 'Prohibition to Be in a Church', Iyyar 22, 5768 (2008), <https://www.yeshiva.co/ask/3859> (on entering a church). All accessed 27 May 2021.

of Bar Kochba against the Roman occupation, 'idolatrous' presence in the Land of Israel seemed a persistent and lasting phenomenon. The tractate of Avodah Zarah in the Mishnah deals with the rabbinic laws and attitudes towards idolatry and heathens. The perspective of the Mishnah on the laws towards idols seems to be rather lenient compared to Biblical law – overall no physical destruction of idols is prescribed, and generally a symbolic act of desecration/destruction (*bitul*, annihilation) – that is, trimming, pruning or breaking a branch or twig from a tree that was worshipped or one planted with this intention – by the hand of the heathen is enough to permit the statue, object, or tree itself to remain and to benefit from it.<sup>7</sup> Different views exist<sup>8</sup> on the reasons for the more lenient attitude of the rabbis towards idolatry and its symbols, including the following:

- The theological conception that the status of an idol is 'dependent on the consciousness of the worshipper alone' (N. Zohar).
- A combination of economic reasons (trading) and scepticism on the nature of idols on the part of heathens themselves in the Greco-Roman world (E. Urbach).
- The changing religious-cultural context in which idols 'had no religious standing and were used mostly for decorative purposes' (C. Hayes).
- The rabbis of the Mishnah were knowledgeable about the practice in the Roman world of '*damnatio memoriae*' (Y. Fürstenberg).
- The rabbis worked towards a redefinition of the public sphere adorned with idolatrous Greco-Roman symbols as a neutral one in order to foster coexistence between heathens and Jews (M. Halbertal).<sup>9</sup>

What does stand out, though, is a negative attitude in the Mishnah towards heathens and their culture, religion, and level of morality. For this reason, according to the Mishnah, the faithful Jew should minimize their interactions with the heathen, the heathen's idols, and the broader social-religious environment. For this reason, one should keep physical distance from idols, images, and their worship and also not derive any benefit from them. Furthermore, trading with heathens is forbidden on their holidays and the

7 mAvodah Zarah 3:10; see also 4:5.

8 See Yair Furstenberg, 'The Rabbinic View of Idolatry and the Roman Political Conception of Divinity', *The Journal of Religion*, 90, no. 3 (July 2010): 335–66.

9 Moshe Halbertal, 'Coexisting with the Enemy: Jews and Pagans in the Mishnah', in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 159–72. For a more philosophical discussion on idolatry, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).



three days prior to them, and wine and grape derivatives made by heathens shall not be consumed and neither should any benefit be derived from them. Interestingly enough, in the Talmud we already find a nuance in the statement of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: ‘Gentiles outside of the Land of Israel are not idol worshippers, but they are holding on to a traditional custom of their ancestors.’ Thus, the behaviour of these gentiles is not necessarily interpreted as religious rituals motivated by faith, but as being driven by cultural motives and performed out of respect and honour for an ancient cultural tradition.<sup>10</sup>

## The Middle Ages

Medieval rabbis inherited rabbinic tradition from late antiquity and from the talmudic period. Much of the material was studied from an academic-theological standpoint – as learning for the sake of learning even without any clear practical implication. Still, they had to deal with the new historical and social-religious context in which this material could be studied, as they were living among the medieval Christian and Islamic majority. Although the consensus was that Islam is a monotheistic religion, matters regarding Christianity were less clear, as it held dogmas/doctrines like the Trinity, had a rich iconographic tradition, and practised the veneration of Saints. Maimonides (Spain-Egypt, 12th century) was quite clear in his rulings that Christianity is in fact idolatry,<sup>11</sup> but he was writing from an Islamic context that viewed Christianity in general as idolatrous. Moreover, his rational philosophical orientation leads to an uncompromising stand towards untrue and ‘wrong’ views on God and religion even within Judaism itself. It was Maimonides who formulated Judaism in dogmatic articles that any believer is bound by – that is, not believing in them makes a person a heretic or idol worshipper with all its consequences.<sup>12</sup>

10 bHullin 13b. In fact, Christianity had somewhat similar restrictions towards heathen idols, objects, and jewellery etc. See Stéphanie E. Binder, *Tertullian, On Idolatry and Mishnah Avodah Zarah: Questioning the Parting of the Ways between Christians and Jews* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012).

11 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws on Idolatry 9:4.

12 See Laws on Repentance 3:6-9, for example subpar. 6–7: ‘The following individuals do not have a portion in the world to come. Rather, their [souls] are cut off and they are judged for their great wickedness and sins, forever: the *Minim* ... those who deny the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the [Messianic] redeemer... Five individuals are described as *Minim*: a) one who says there is no God nor ruler of the world; b) one who accepts the concept of a ruler, but maintains that there are two or more; c) one who accepts that there is one Master [of the world], but maintains that He has a body or form; d) one who maintains that He was not the sole

Rabbis living in Northern Europe in a Christian context came to different conclusions. The following arguments were presented to enable trade, certain goods, and food used in a (semi-)religious context and in social relations with Christians:

- We know for sure that Christians among whom we live do not worship idols (Tosafists).<sup>13</sup>
- It is important to avoid tension and animosity between Christians and Jews (Tosafists).<sup>14</sup>
- It is not forbidden for a non-Jew to worship God and include something else (*shituf*) in it (Trinity). Or, as an alternative explanation of this ruling, taking an oath using God's name and including something else like the Gospels, Saints, and Jesus does not infringe upon monotheism for a non-Jew (the Tosafists, France and Germany, 12–14th century).<sup>15</sup>
- Christians behave according to moral and ethical religious norms, and this makes them juridically equal to Jews (Meiri, Spain, 12–13th century). For some reason, this last standpoint has not received much attention in the halachic discourse until recently.<sup>16</sup>

The interpretation of the concept of *shituf* leads to different halachic standpoints on Christianity by later rabbis in the modern era:<sup>17</sup>

- Christianity is not idolatrous, and their idols/symbols or prayer houses are permissible for them.
- Christianity is not idolatry, but their images in a religious-cultic setting are forbidden including the prayer houses containing images.

First Being and Creator of all existence; e) one who serves a star, constellation, or other entity so that it will serve as an intermediary between him and the eternal Lord. Each of these five individuals is a Min.' Elyahu Touger, trans., *Mishneh Torah* (New York/Jerusalem: Moznaim, 1989), [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/682956/jewish/Mishneh-Torah.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682956/jewish/Mishneh-Torah.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Tosafot on Avodah Zarah 2a.

<sup>14</sup> Tosafot on Avodah Zarah 2a.

<sup>15</sup> Tosafot on bBechorot 2b and bSanhedrin 63b. On *shituf* see further, e.g. Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding*. (New York: MacMillan, 2010), 178–80; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Same God, Other god: Judaism, Hinduism, and the Problem of Idolatry* (New York: MacMillan, 2016), esp. 93–95. See also Judah David Bleich, 'Entering a Non-Jewish House of Worship', *Tradition* 44, no. 2 (2011): 74–77.

<sup>16</sup> See Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists of Provence* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 80–108 [Hebrew version].

<sup>17</sup> See Leon Mock 'From Church to Synagogue: The Bankras Church (Amstelveen, the Netherlands) as a Case from the Responsa', in *Jerusalem and Other Holy Places as Foci of Multireligious and Ideological Confrontation*, ed. Pieter B. Hartog, Shulamit Laderman, Vered Tohar, and Archibald van Wieringen, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series vol. 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 258–74, esp. 261–62.

- Christians are not idolaters, but Christianity is idolatrous – a difference between the doctrines of the religion and the attitude towards the worshippers.
- Christianity is idolatry even without idols (e.g. Protestantism) – making a location/building in which clear religious actions are performed (like kneeling, bowing down, burning of candles, praying) prohibited.

## Contemporary Responsa Texts

What is the discourse on idolatry in contemporary orthodox Judaism? It would, of course, be impossible in the scope of this contribution to focus on the discourse of the past five hundred years – approximately the time frame of the beginnings of modernity and secular(ized) society. Furthermore, the rabbinic discourse is highly diverse in genre, from codices and commentaries to sermons, novellas on the Talmud, and pietistic-ethical literature. A useful source is the genre of responsa, in which a question is addressed to an expert rabbi who is expected to give an answer. The question could be directed to the rabbi by a colleague, a congregation, or (learned) laypeople. The genre of the responsa is especially useful for understanding historical circumstances, because the question usually arises from some kind of social practice: the expert rabbi handed down a concrete ruling for a specific case from real life. Still, theoretical responsa also exist, meant for analytical exercise or theoretical debate on rabbinic law but that are not necessarily related to a concrete reality. These responsa may be invented for the sake of education. In that case, the discourse is more related to intellectual problems and their solutions and arises from the perspective of rabbinic learning of ‘Torah for its own sake’ (*lishmah*), where the focus is intentionally not on a concrete problem from real life or on a particular desired or undesired praxis.

## The Responsa Project

A helpful tool for analysing the discourse is the Responsa Project of Bar-Ilan University (started in the 1970s) that digitized, among other texts, responsa of famous orthodox rabbis. The data in the project is far from being complete though, since not all authors are included but only a selection. Moreover, the genre of responsa is an unlimited ‘storehouse’ of texts, as contemporary responsa are continuously published. A search for the term ‘idol worship’ (עבודה זרה) – without any particle or suffix and not written as an abbreviation

– in texts from authors who lived from about the 1500s up to the twenty-first century yields the large number of 3,166 hits, which could be related to 1,273 texts (version 26). One should be cautious in interpreting these initial results, as it only shows that the term has a high frequency in the corpus of texts but not how it is used. It could be a reference to the existing tractate *Avodah Zarah* in the Mishnah or Talmud, a peripheral use of the term in a discussion on a completely different subject by way of analogy or case study, or a highly theoretical question without any direct relation to real life. What does stand out, though, is that the majority of the texts and hits seem to be related to authors from the past seventy to eighty years – which means the post-Shoah period. These 1,273 texts are too comprehensive to address in this contribution, which is why we will turn to another source that offers some glimpses into modern discourse on idolatry in some rabbinic circles.

## Other Contemporary Media

To get an alternative perspective, although somewhat preliminary, on the wider context of the discourse on idolatry in contemporary Rabbinic halakhic texts and its possible impact on the religious community, it is useful to turn to other sources of information. In the past decennia, written responsa by the expert rabbi are facing competition from other media that are addressing questions mostly from the common believer. This development is directly connected to new technology that has emerged. Elsewhere, I have written on the rise of SMS responsa (questions and answers through the medium of SMS), questions posted in synagogue leaflets that are sometimes also available on the Internet, and the more important question-and-answer tool on religious websites.<sup>18</sup> They give a more up-to-date view on what is going on in religious communities, partly because they are accessible for the believer and facilitate asking questions anonymously to a rabbi. This makes it easier to pose questions that are related to subjects like intimacy and sexuality,<sup>19</sup> but it also allows for expressing doubt over certain religious

18 See Leon Mock, *The Concept of ›Ruach Ra'ah‹ in Contemporary Rabbinic Responsa (1945–2000): Possible Relations between Knowledge of the Physical World and Traditional Knowledge in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 19–22. See also B. Brown, 'Instant Responsa – Towards a Halachic Realism?' (lecture, Association of Hebrew Law at the University of Tel-Aviv, summer 2016), accessed 26 October 2021, [https://www.academia.edu/27003713/Instant\\_Responsa\\_Toward\\_Halachic\\_Realism\\_Hebrew](https://www.academia.edu/27003713/Instant_Responsa_Toward_Halachic_Realism_Hebrew).

19 See, for example, Ruth Tsuria, 'Discourse of Practice: The Negotiation of Sexual Norms via Online Religious Discourse', *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3595–613.

dogmas and ideas. Since internet responsa are a relatively new phenomenon, the following are only preliminary findings.

A good example of a frequently visited website for Religious Zionist Jews in Israel is the *Kipa* website. Kipa.co.il has been active for about twenty years and is one of the important online portals for the Religious Zionist movement in Judaism within Israel.<sup>20</sup> On this website articles are published on a wide range of topics, from news, romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, and food and culture to strictly religious issues. The website also has a wide range of fora on different subjects like parenthood, relationships, young married couples, fertility, and support for those who are bereaved. Part of the religious themes is the 'Ask-the-Rabbi' page, where a question can be addressed to some twenty-five different rabbis. The site has a search tool for the thousands of archived questions on various subjects.

## Internet Questions

A search for idolatry (עבודה זרה) yields 103 questions, most of them answered by rabbis and others by a friend from the peer group 'Listening Friends' (*chaverim makshivim*), as some of the questioners are clearly young adults. The length of the responsa varies from a few lines to about an A4 page, and they usually do not refer to any sources for support. Out of these questions, fourteen are directed towards Christianity, four towards Islam/Druze religion, and seventeen to religions of the Far East. In general, the religions of the Far East are seen as the most idolatrous, followed by Christianity, which, with some nuance, is seen as idolatry (although mainly some branches, and the *shituf*-concept is not rejected),<sup>21</sup> while Islam is seen as fully monotheistic. Ten questions deal with internal Jewish issues like superstition, exaggerated veneration of rabbis in some Jewish sects, or the Shoah and nationalism in relation to idolatry (see below). Most of the questions have a concrete halachic nature (25) or deal with more general halachic/theological concepts (24) that need clarification for the questioner but which do not bear on direct

20 Ruth Tsuria and Heide A. Campbell, "In My Own Opinion": Negotiation of Rabbinical Authority Online in Responsa Within Kipa.co.il', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2020): 65–84.

21 See the following question on the nature of idolatry and its relevance for today (answered by the 'Team of the Petah Tiqvah Yeshivah'): <https://www.kipa.co.il/16-שאל-את-הרב/עבודה-זרה-16/>. And the question specifically on idolatry in relation to the concept of 'shituf' (answered by Rabbi Y. Sherlow): <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/עבודה-זרה-ושייתוף/>. Both accessed 11 May 2021.

practical application. Some questions are written from a strong personal perspective and reflection (9).

Some of the questions are related to the halakhic discourse of well-known aspects of rabbinic law on idolatry (e.g. polytheism and *shituf*, glasses decorated with a sun, trade in objects with an image of Buddha, the symbol of the cross, statues for garden decoration, statues of magic and apparent magical customs, statues of Christianity, Islam, and their symbols) and less interesting examples. Other questions are clearly related to the here-and-now and show an interesting scope of possible applications for the category of idolatry by contemporary religious Jews in Israel to assess new situations and phenomena. It shows new dimensions that add to the picture emerging from the classic, written responsa of the leading rabbinical authorities in orthodoxy, partly because they emerge from a different socio-religious background. However, since the answers are relatively short compared to the classical form and use a different idiom and style, it is even more important to further contextualize the texts by relating them to the halachic, theological, and political views (if relevant) of the author as expressed in other writings or utterings. Additional tools from the social sciences and communication science may be needed. In the confines of this contribution, any conclusion is therefore only preliminary.

Below I present a limited number of selected topics addressed in the online responsa of the *Kipa* website on the subject of idolatry. Some of them will be brought together with a longer summary of the answer.<sup>22</sup>

- My army commander is a Druze and has invited the recruits to his home village – are Druze considered as idolaters or not (like Islam)?<sup>23</sup>  
Answer by Rabbi Sherlow: The Druze religion is a secret one, but as far as is known by outsiders it is not idolatry.
- A visit to tourist sites that used to be idolatrous: for example, can one have a picture taken with the statue of Jesus in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro)?<sup>24</sup>

22 The listed questions can be found on the following webpages: [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-עבודה-זרה/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-עבודה-זרה&rabbid=1&rabbid\\_search=חפש](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-עבודה-זרה/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-עבודה-זרה&rabbid=1&rabbid_search=חפש), [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid\\_search=חפש&page=2](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid_search=חפש&page=2), [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid\\_search=חפש&page=3](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid_search=חפש&page=3), [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid\\_search=חפש&page=4](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid_search=חפש&page=4), [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid\\_search=חפש&page=5](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש&rabbid=1&rabbid_search=חפש&page=5). All accessed 11 May 2021.

23 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-החילום-שלי-דרווי-והזמין-את-החילום-שלי-לכפר-האם-הדת-ה-הדת-ה>, accessed 11 May 2021.

24 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב-שלוש-וברכה-חלום-שלי-מגיל-ינקות-הוא-לבקר-בשבת-פלאי-תבל-ואחד>, accessed 11 May 2021.

- Answer by Rabbi Sherlow: the older sources did not know of photography, but there is the prohibition of deriving pleasure from idolatry and the like [in the sources]. It seems not appropriate.
- Are yoga and meditation idolatrous?<sup>25</sup> Answer by Rabbi B. Efrati: There are [yoga] sects that are idolatrous – it depends on what is taught and by whom. In general: if yoga is taught only as a technology [for relaxation] without references to theology and forces, it is permissible, on the condition that the awe for God is not impaired. But the best is to study Torah, which is the real medicine.
  - The attitude towards ‘Messianic Jews’ – are they idolators and is one allowed to make fun of them and curse them not in their presence?<sup>26</sup> Answer by Rabbi Y.H. Amichai of the Torah and Land Institute: Christianity is idolatry, one is allowed to make fun of them [Messianic Jews], but there is no gain in cursing them.
  - The status of Islamic prayer beads (*misbahah* or *sibha* in Arabic) belonging to one’s Jewish father from Iraq after migrating to Israel.<sup>27</sup> Answer by Rabbi Y.H. Amichai of the Torah and Land Institute: it seems permissible to keep it in the house – it is not prayer, just made to remember the number of the names of Allah.<sup>28</sup> It is not an idolatrous object but an object and external help in reciting the names of Allah. Especially as the subject is Muslims ... who are not idolatrous as the Christians are.
  - Visiting the Bahá’í Gardens in Haifa.<sup>29</sup> Answer by Rabbi b. Efrati: the leading Halakhic authority of Haifa permitted it after research into their religion.
  - Can one take courses on other religions with pagan elements (e.g. gods, spirits, demons)? And a question on prana.<sup>30</sup> Answer by Rabbi Y. Sherlow on the first question: The Talmud already taught that learning about idolatry is permitted to members of the Sanhedrin. The medieval rabbis apparently made this permission more generally acceptable, as they themselves were well schooled in idolatrous elements of other religions. Therefore, academic learning might be permissible.
  - The status of a wall tapestry from India shaped like a mandala made of elephants. (Permitted, only forbidden if made for idolatrous use.)

25 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/יוגה-ומדיטציה-כעבודה-זרה>, accessed 11 May 2021.

26 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/לצחוק-על-עבודה-זרה>, accessed 11 May 2021.

27 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/מסבחה-האם-נחשב-עבודה-זרה>, accessed 11 May 2021.

28 Interestingly enough the rabbi uses the word Allah.

29 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/עבודה-זרה-39>, accessed 11 May 2021.

30 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/לימודים-בנושא-עבודה-זרה-ופראנה-2>, accessed 11 May 2021.

- The status of religious buildings that have long ceased to be used and are now tourist sites (churches, mosques – e.g. Hagia Sophia), status of temples in the Far East (two separate questions). Answer on first question<sup>31</sup> by Rabbi Z. Yanir: an idolatrous place that is not functioning anymore [in its original function] or was converted, one is allowed to enter. If statues or iconic paintings are still present here, one should not enter.
- Question from an adult man about 'saving' a female friend who wants to become a Buddhist nun in Tibet (posted to four rabbis!).<sup>32</sup> They advise him to direct her to different institutes and rabbis (including themselves) for guidance, counsel, and answering her questions.
- Watching sport (basketball), is it equal to idolatry? (No.)
- Questions to different rabbis on watching films with idolatrous fragments (example: Christian wedding – answer: not idolatrous, but needs repentance) and books (fragments of Christian prayer, Christian motives (answer: permissance depends on the way these motives are presented), buying a book with an illustration of Jesus and Maria on the cover (permissible).
- Are piercings idolatry? (No.)
- Is Chabad/Chassidism in general considered idol worship due to its attitude towards famous rabbis? (No.)
- Does national pride resemble idolatry? (No/Not necessarily.)
- Did Jews who hid themselves in churches and monasteries during the Shoah and pretended to be Christians sin and act like idol worshippers instead of dying as martyrs? Answer of Rabbi S. Eliyahu: Jews that lived during the Shoah and hid themselves in monasteries and prayed in churches did not commit idolatrous worship.<sup>33</sup> This short answer is not explained by any reference to relevant rabbinic sources.

## Discussion

These questions in some respect more often reflect the doubts and mindset of the questioner than a genuine halakhic question, as a classical responsum usually does. Sometimes this is the result of the questioner being a young

31 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/בתי-עבודה-זרה/>, accessed 11 May 2021.

32 [https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=עבודה+זרה&rabi=1&rabi\\_search=חפש&page=4](https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/שאל-את-הרב-תוצאות-חיפוש/?subject=עבודה+זרה&rabi=1&rabi_search=חפש&page=4), accessed 11 May 2021.

33 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/עבודה-זרה-בשואה/>, accessed 11 May 2021.



adult or adolescent. The questions show religious believers referring to new situations that confront them with respect to other religious cultures, either during tourist trips abroad or in new contexts (e.g. army service). On the other hand, the questions reflect the influence of the Eastern religions and their cultures on modern Israeli society in the last decades, mostly through trips made to the Far East after the conclusion of military service and through the prevalence of Western lifestyle (questions on yoga, meditation, prana).

A different perspective is posed by the questions that touch on symbols of modern Western culture and their status in a religious community, which itself is to a certain extent open to these symbols: jeans, piercings, films, television, sport, and secular literature. The questions seem to reflect a certain level of doubt, fear, and feelings of guilt towards non-Jewish, secular, outward symbols of modernity that are, however, to a certain degree incorporated into the lifestyle of these believers. The answers may be considered as a sort of guide on how to deal with the perceived conflict/tension or gap between the dominant religious culture and accepted behaviour of the questioner and some aspects of their lifestyle, offering a kind of coping mechanism on the psychological tensions in engaging with other cultures. It is important to note here that the respondent rabbi may sometimes be more lenient than the assumed religious vision/mindset of the questioner.

### **Chassidism, Religious-Zionism, and Nationalism**

The last category of questions deals with the positioning of the religious believer and adherent of Religious Zionism vis-à-vis other Jewish religious groups and with certain aspects of Religious Zionist ideology (national pride). The questions on Chabad Chassidism and Chassidism in general possibly reflect the need to distinguish their own religious affiliation from these other Jewish movements, particularly when these movements possess certain aspects that are attractive. A certain overlap between ideas in Religious Zionism and Chassidism exists, especially through the mediation of the books and ideas of Rabbi Abraham I. Kook, but also through the influences of Chassidic movements like Chabad and Breslov on Israeli society in the last decades. The question about Jews hiding in churches and monasteries during the Shoah and the problem this poses in the eyes of the questioner – would it possibly not be better that they had sacrificed their lives than posing as a Christian? – reflects more than just a negative attitude towards Christianity as being idolatrous. It could point to the challenges and problems raised by incorporating the Shoah into one's religious worldview and may also reflect different internal religious Jewish

perspectives on the Shoah (God's hand or only the doing of mankind), the murdered Jews (sinners or saints), and those who survived (heroes or sinners).

Finally, the question on nationalism may indicate doubts over whether being proud of being religious and part of the chosen people could possibly be idolatrous by touching on the religious importance given by Religious Zionism to nationhood. This question is, incidentally, not answered by a rabbi but by peers called 'Listening Friends' (*chaverim makshevim*). In the answer a difference is drawn between pride in someone's own achievements and pride in being chosen by God, which is after all God's choice; the importance of remembering the destination and task of the chosen people in the world is highlighted; and a call for developing national pride as a reaction to the idea of 'being as all the nations' is emphasized.<sup>34</sup> This last question and answer in particular positions the questioner vis-à-vis secular Zionism ('being as all the nations'), secular modernity (the non-Jewish world), and ultra-orthodoxy that rejects (religious) Zionism.

The questions and answers and the discourse that is created by this interaction – whether a lenient, strict, or mitigated position is taken by the respondent – function as a guide or compass in new situations (army, tourist trips). But they also seem to refer to an inner dialogue within the believers themselves in facing certain aspects of life where the interaction between internal religious feelings or ideas and real life creates tensions. These tensions, doubts, or negative emotions are caused by a range of influences of Jewish and non-Jewish origin and are mitigated by the discourse of these online questions and answers.

## Preliminary Conclusions

We began this contribution by describing the attitude towards idolatry in changing historical and socio-religious contexts, from the Bible and the Second Temple era to late antiquity, medieval Rabbinic Judaism, and modernity. Especially in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, a more lenient perspective has emerged that focuses on coexistence and status quo, based on different understandings of idolatry and its worshippers. The genre of classical responsa seems to be a useful corpus of texts when researching the role of idolatry in contemporary texts, considering that they usually relate to cases from real life. A search for the term 'idolatry' in the CD-ROM<sup>35</sup> of

34 <https://www.kipa.co.il/שאל-את-הרב/גאווה-לאומית-דומה-לעבודה-זרה>, accessed 11 May 2021.

35 Bar-Ilan University, *The Responsa Project* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2018), Version 26.

the responsa texts yields more than 3,000 hits, relating to 1273 texts, a huge number to analyse in depth. Most of the hits seem, however, to be related to contemporary authors of the past seven or eight decades.

The internet responsa proves a valuable addition to these written sources, as they present matters from the more mundane reality of everyday life, reflecting the easily accessible sites offered by the Internet. The discourse seems to function as a marker of orthodox Religious-Zionist Jewish identity of certain groups and presents two perspectives, an internal and external one. They show different aspects of religious orthodox identity in contemporary Israel and its grappling with Western influences, the popularity of religions of the Far East among some Israelis, tourist encounters with the 'religious other', and the religious other in the Israeli context (Christianity, Islam, Druze, Messianic Jews, Bahá'í). On the other hand, inner discourses become visible on delicate religious subjects like the Shoah, how to deal with other (ultra-)orthodox movements, and issues of Religious Zionism and its attitude towards nationalism. Of special interest is the question concerning Holocaust survivors who hid themselves in churches and monasteries, which stands on the intersection between an internal (attitude towards Jews with Christian associations – whether chosen or forced) and external perspective (*vis-à-vis* Christianity) on identity.

Finally, since these internet responsa texts have virtually no references to the Bible, they cannot be seen as simply continuing the biblical perspective; in fact, the early rabbis were already reinterpreting and adapting this perspective, integrating alternate views into their theology on idolatry. Indeed, even references to earlier rabbinical sources are relatively rare in these internet responsa, and the discourse seems to have its own characteristic features to some degree. Further analysis of both written responsa and internet responsa is required to sharpen our perspective on these texts and, in particular, to assess the relation between the discourses as meant for the ingroup versus those focused on the external other – and their interdependence. A further contextualization of the texts and their author is also needed. In this respect, the deliberations offered above are no more than preliminary reflections.

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# 11 *Al-walā' w' al-barā'* (Loyalty and Disavowal): Reconstructing a 'Creed' in the Muslim Hermeneutics of 'Otherness'

*Yaser Ellethy*

## Abstract

The notion of *al-walā' w' al-barā'* is entrenched in some classical and modern Muslim discourses as a creed that ordains a Muslim's view and attitude toward 'disbelievers'. The proponents of a doctrinal position of this notion in Islam utilize a certain reading of scriptural sources to justify the coherence of this 'creed'. A thorough investigation could reconstruct the applicability of this claim. Almost all these texts relate to situations of interreligious conflicts, competing coalitions, and menacing amities with enemies where belongings and loyalties cannot be negotiable. In this respect, the liaison between apostasy and disloyalty lies in the fact that *ridda*, in premodern contexts, included disengagement from the community, change of allegiance, and therefore enmity with the former socio-political context.

**Keywords:** *walā'* (loyalty), *barā'* (disavowal), *tafsīr* (Koranexegese), *'aqīda* (creed), *ridda* (apostasy), tolerance

## Introduction

It did not take long in the early history of Islam before the Islamic legal theorists felt the need to articulate the relation between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms that were not always theological. Already at the very emergence of the new geopolitical entity in Medina, a charter (*Ṣaḥīfa*) was signed between the Prophet and non-Muslim parties. We find there a genuine paradigm of an Islamic *Contrat Social* in which civil and political

inter-relations of loyalty and disloyalty are set beyond religious and tribal adherence. It was, however, under this very label of loyalty and disloyalty that some Muslim classical and modern jurists developed the notion of *al-walā' w' al-barā'*, which, in some cases, was classified under the tenets of Muslim belief (*aqīda*). In modern times the 'doctrine' of *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* was, and still is, enthusiastically used among militant groups to justify warfare activities, not only against non-Muslims but also against Muslims who are not in line with their 'Islam'. The question is whether this 'theory' can be established on explicit and unequivocal scriptural grounds and whether it can justify hate speech and practices against the 'other'. This contribution is an attempt to find an answer to this question by examining Islamic sources as embodied in the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, and some classical and modern exegetic and legal works.

I will first examine the linguistic and technical use of the term and what it may presuppose for the relation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Next, I explore some scriptural texts that are claimed to stipulate the notion of loyalty and disloyalty. The contexts in which these texts were historically located will help scrutinize the specific case they address and the generic rule (*hukm*) that can be extracted. Qur'ānic exegesis knows the 'reasons of revelation' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), while the relevant method in case of the hadith traditions is known as '*asbāb al-wurūd*'.<sup>1</sup> Both methods, when properly employed together with the broader context of the text in discussion, can significantly change the approach a literal or ostensible reading might suggest. I then move to the discussion of the jurisprudence/*fiqh*-oriented issue of apostasy (*ridda*) and its possible link with disloyalty, which historically marked the question of freedom of religion in Islam and still inspires contemporary writings and debates on Islamic exclusivism.

## Definition

The term *walā'* linguistically denotes proximity (*qurb*, from the stem *w-l-y*, among many other derivations and meanings) whether physically or emotionally, including being content with and following others as if one belongs to them (Q. 5:51; 'who among you takes them as *awliā'* [allies, friends; pl. of *walīy*] is one of them'), support and help (*nuṣra*), and love (*maḥabba/mawadda*), and the derivative *muwālā* (alliance, friendship) is to be seen

1 Both methods are concerned with the historical contexts where Qur'ānic verses were revealed or hadiths were communicated/reported in the time of the revelation.

as opposite to enmity (*mu'ādā*).<sup>2</sup> Technically it means support, help, love, and showing honour and respect to those in proximity or to likeminded people both inwardly and/or outwardly.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, it concerns God, his messenger, and the believers.

On the other hand, *barā'* means, in the context of our discussion, abandoning, severance, distancing oneself from, disavowal, and denial of something/someone.<sup>4</sup> Technically it denotes getting rid of and disavowal of, distancing and disassociating oneself from, and showing enmity to something/someone. Again, in this respect, it concerns the enemies of God, his messenger, and the believers.

### Does it Belong to 'Aqīda (Creed/Doctrine)?

There is an established opinion among several mainstream Muslim scholars that the issue of *walā'* towards believers and *barā'* towards unbelievers and enemies of Islam belongs to the fundamentals of Islamic creed ('*aqīda*). It is distinguished in the relevant literature as 'the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal' ('*aqīdat al-walā' w'al-barā'*). It is claimed that ISIS 'advocates strict adherence to Islam through the lens of the distinctly Salafi and particularly Wahhabi doctrine of *al-Wala wa-l-Bara'*, as this 'doctrine' constitutes the central component among 'Salafi-Wahhabi' streams.<sup>5</sup> This is reflected in ISIS literature where the leader of the self-proclaimed caliphate sees our contemporary world in two antagonistic camps. In his mobilization speech with a call to Hijra (emigration) to join his camp, al-Baghdadi addresses Muslims worldwide: 'O Ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufṛ* (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews [sic], the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of *kufṛ*, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews [sic].'<sup>6</sup>

2 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1981), 6:4920–25; Ibn Faris, *Maqāyīs al-Lughā* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), 6:141–42.

3 M. Al-Qahtani, *Al-walā' wa'l-barā' fi 'l-Islam* (Mecca: Dar Tiba, 1416 H.), 89–90.

4 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 1:240–241; Ibn Faris, *Maqāyīs*, 1:236–37.

5 Hamid Durrani, '*Al-Wala wa-l-Bara* and the Western Foreign Fighters of the Islamic State' (MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 2019), 1.

6 ISIS, 'The Return of Khilafah', *Dabiq*, I (1435/2014), 10, <https://www.ieproject.org/projects/dabiq1.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2016. The use of a small 'j' in 'jews' by the writer of this issue might be pejoratively intended.

In a widespread work on the question, it is noted that the qualities of *al-walā' w'al-barā'* are concerned with one of Islam's main foundations and even seen as one of the most important requirements of the bedrock of Islamic faith: *tawhīd* (pure monotheism).<sup>7</sup> This is because these 'are two major prerequisites of true faith: *al-wala'* is a manifestation of sincere love for Allah, His prophets and the believers; *al-bara'*, on the other hand, is an expression of enmity and hatred towards falsehood and its adherents. Both are evidence of iman [faith].<sup>8</sup> Other writers ascribe it to the prerequisites of the very declaration of faith (*al-walā' w'al-barā' min lawāzīm Lā ilāha ill' Allāh*).<sup>9</sup> In this view acting against this '*aqīda* includes travelling to the lands of the disbelievers and residing there (unless for reasons of preaching Islam, trade, or persecution), copying them in dress and tongue, and even using their calendar.<sup>10</sup>

The paradox of this take on the issue as part of '*aqīda* lies in the epistemological and methodological justifications and ethical scope of this doctrine. It is established in the legal Islamic theory of *uṣūl al-fiqh* that its realm of research is strictly related to 'practical rules' (*aḥkām 'amaliyya*) and does not include issues of '*aqīda*.<sup>11</sup> However, in this case, the supporters of the '*aqīda* nature of the notion start with practical rules for dealing with certain groups and ideas considered to be anti-Islamic and incorporate them into the tenets of Islamic creed legitimized by scriptural texts. The question is whether this is a traditionally justified practice of the prophetic era and the following generations of righteous predecessors (*salaf*), which these supporters cherish as the pristine and pure source of Islam. Was loyalty a notion exclusively related to faith? Since the very establishment

7 M. Al-Qahtani, *Al-wala' wa'l-bara' according to the 'Aqeedah of the Salaf* (London: Al-Firdous, 1999), part I, 6, 9. The leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, depicts *al-walā' w'al-barā'* as great pillar of *tawhīd*; see Mohamed Bin Ali, *The Roots of Religious Extremism: Understanding the Salafi Doctrine of Al-Wala' Wal Bara'* (London: Imperial College, 2016), 228.

8 Al-Qahtani, *Al-wala' wa'l-bara'*, 6; Cf. the Arabic original edition (M. Al-Qahtani, *Al-walā' wa'l-barā' fi 'l-Islam*, 8–9) where he blames those who undermine this issue when it is a matter of 'belief or disbelief' and that there is no other ruling in the Qur'an with so much evidence as this one. See also Mohamed Bin Ali, 'Al-Wala' Wal Bara' in Wahhabism: From A Tool to Fight Shirk to Takfir of Muslim Leaders', *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, 7, no. 1 (2019): 28–43 (p. 28), who claims that in the 'Wahhabi ideology', any Muslim who does not adhere to a certain level of *walā' w'al-barā'* 'is at risk of committing apostasy and becoming a non-Muslim'.

9 M. Al-Bunian, *Al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (Riyadh: Dar al-Qasim, 1418 H.), 12, 18; N. Jabrouni, '*al-walā' w'al-barā' min lawāzīm Lā ilāha ill' Allāh*', Alukah, accessed 25 February 2021, <https://www.alukah.net/sharia/0/113988/>.

10 Al-Bunian, *Al-wala' wa'l-bara'*, 9, 32–38.

11 See Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129; Abu Zahra, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi, 1958), 6; Wahba Al-Zuhaili, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), 19.

of a Muslim geopolitical entity, the Medina Charter stipulated a strong bond of loyalty to the new established 'state' under the leadership of the prophet, including Jewish tribes and anyone else who joined the people of the Charter. This constitutional document refers to Jews and other partners as forming one *ummah* with the Muslim believers. The same document affirmed that Muslims have their own religion and Jews have theirs, but both parties are committed to defend or contribute to the defence of Medina and should not keep alliance with or help enemies of the people of the document.<sup>12</sup> This means that 'loyalty' can be a trans-religious bond based on values of social coherence, political consolidation, and protection of national integrity beyond (non)denominational affiliations. In today's nation-state, democratic constitutionalism, where citizenship shapes loyalties and disloyalties, Muslims and non-Muslims stand together in defence of their national integrity regardless of their different religious belongings.<sup>13</sup> Reciprocally, Muslim legal scholars have accepted a (prolonged) residence of Muslims in non-Muslim countries where they are able to perform their religious prescriptions freely and overtly and enjoy safety. They are obliged to obey the laws of the land where they reside and respect the conditions under which they were granted this safety (*amān*).<sup>14</sup> It is reasonable that both religious belonging and disavowal of other forms of belief define and involve loyalty to a certain faith-worldview narrative. This is true even at the intra-religious level where 'sects', 'heresies', and 'unorthodox' groups are cast out from a certain 'mainstream' of a claimed 'orthodoxy'.<sup>15</sup> There is thus a *walā'* and *barā'* for the '*aqīda*' but not a '*aqīda* of *walā'* and *barā'*'. Doctrinal dissociations have always characterized the Islamic theological tradition of *kalām* (dialectic/scholastic theology). Yet, the pluralistic Islamic view draws clear borderlines between *credo* and *tractatio*.<sup>16</sup>

12 Yaser Ellethy, *Islam, Context, Pluralism and Democracy: Classical and Modern Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2017), 123–24.

13 In the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel, a Christian engineer inspired the Egyptian military leadership with the idea of high-pressure water hoses to demolish and overrun the Bar Lev Line on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Every year, during the national day, his name is celebrated as one of the heroes of this war.

14 See W. A. Shadid and P. S. van Koningsveld, 'Loyalty to a Non-Muslim Government: An Analysis of Islamic Normative Discussions and of the Views of Some Contemporary Islamicists', in *Political Participation and Identities of Muslims in Non-Muslim States*, ed. W. A. Shadid and P. S. van Koningsveld (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 84–115.

15 For a definition of the Islamic notion of 'orthodoxy', see Yaser Ellethy, 'A Controversial Orthodoxy: Al-Ghazali's Revival of the Religious Sciences', *Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2020), 375–86 (p. 377).

16 For an extensive discussion of the Islamic pluralistic view see Ellethy, *Islam, Context*, 101–30.



## Scriptural Justifications Contextualized

As for almost all the rulings and different regulations of sharia, evidences (*adilla*) and founding legal texts (*nuṣūṣ sharʿiyya*) that justify them are to be traced back (even analogically), accordingly appropriated, and interpreted in the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. David Johnston observes the distinction between Muslim and Christian methodologies in this respect:

[W]hereas western Christians accorded a secondary holy status to the Emperor Justinian's *corpus juris civilis*, Muslims could not grant final authority in legal matters to any other text but the sacred texts of the Qurʾān and Sunna. And while both Christians and Muslims regarded their respective authoritative texts as emanating from God, directly or indirectly, and both communities considered the primary task of the jurist to be exegesis and commentary of these texts, only in Islam does text of the Qurʾān acquire prime theological and legal importance in its very wording.<sup>17</sup>

These authoritative sources confront Muslim jurists and exegetes with scriptural texts that literally address the issue of *al-walāʾ wʾal-barāʾ*, linked to certain legal injunctions of do and do not (*amr-nahī*). However, examining in detail the contexts of when and where these texts were revealed and communicated shows how they involve specific cases, mostly inimical and warlike situations. When these rules are to be evoked and generalized to common cases,<sup>18</sup> as part of the immutable realm of *ʿaqīda*, the historical etiological connotation (*dalāla*) should be correspondingly involved in the process of extracting legal evidences (*adilla*). This hermeneutic-methodological principle helps to reconstruct not only the textual premises of the notion of *al-walāʾ wʾal-barāʾ* but also its socio-political and ethical scope. The original *ratio legis* behind the divine injunctions in these different revelations is in most cases absent in the process of the generalization (*taʾmīm*) of this proposition. Several Qurʾānic verses are generically employed as main scriptural vindication of this so-called *ʿaqīda*. I will indicatively put the relevant Arabic term (e.g. *awliāʾ*; pl. of *walīy* < *walāʾ*; *buraʾāʾ*, pl. of *barīʾ* <

17 David Johnston, 'A Turn in the Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Twentieth Century Usul al-Fiqh', *Islamic Law and Society* 11, no. 2 (2004): 233–82.

18 The traditional exegetic and juristic rule in dealing with the reasons of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) states that consideration is to be given to the generality of the wording and not to the specificity of the reason (*al-ʿibra bi ʿumūm al-laḥdh lā bi khuṣūṣ al-sabab*).

*barā'*) where it falls, with a suggested translation between square brackets, or leave it untranslated, as the context changes and a semantic value can be accordingly proposed. The verses will be followed by a short exegetical annotation summarizing mainly two classical exegetes, al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373).<sup>19</sup> Both are authoritative in traditional Sunni mainstream *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis) up to the present day, the first for his legal-juristic commentary and the latter as representing traditionalist Islam and as an esteemed authority in modern Salafism. Another crucial factor in this choice is that both scholars eventually witnessed and endured turbulent consequences of decisive wars among Muslim and non-Muslim powers. Muslim Caliphates in Andalusia and Baghdad that, even symbolically, represented the grandeur of Islam were doomed to continuous conflicts with non-Muslim regimes and historical decays. In such times of 'religious' wars, the need to saliently stress the boundaries of 'we' and 'them', loyalties and disloyalties, becomes conspicuous and predominant. What follows, thus, is a brief examination of these commentaries to shed some light on how two authoritative exegetes, each from his own perspective and orientation, reflect on verses related to the notion of *al-walā' w'al-barā'* in heavily conflict-laden contexts.<sup>20</sup> The quoted verses follow the order in which they fall in the chapters of the Qur'ān:

Let not the believers take disbelievers for their *awliā'* [friends/helpers] in preference to believers. Whoever does this has no connection with Allah unless you are guarding yourselves against them as a precaution. Allah bids you to beware (only) of Himself. And to Allah is the final return. (3:28)

The verse relates to a situation of antagonism and enmity between believers and disbelievers in exceptional war and conflict contexts, as some narrations on the reasons of revelation report.<sup>21</sup> It is prohibited for Muslims in these cases to disclose their strategic confidential plans and/or seek support from disbelievers, at the cost of their own belief, and to risk their co-believers thinking they will be protected. The verse exempts cases of guarding and protecting oneself (*taqīyya*), affirming the exceptionality of these peculiar risky situations.

19 Al-Qurtubi, *al-Jāmi' li ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'ssasat Al-Risala, 2006); Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* (Cairo: Dar Al-Hadith, 2003).

20 References in both *tafsīr* works can be consulted under their interpretation of the discussed verses.

21 See, e.g. Al-Asqalani, *Al-'ujāb fi bayān al-asbāb* (Beirut: Dar ibn Hazm, 2002), 676–77.

O you who have believed! Do not take your *biṭāna* [confidants, friends, advisors, consultants] those who are not of your kind. They spare no effort to injure you. Indeed they love all that distresses you. Their hatred is clearly manifest in what they say, and what their hearts conceal is even greater. Now We have made Our messages clear to you, if only you can understand (the danger of their intimacy). Lo! It is you who love [*tuḥībūn*] them but they do not love you even though you believe in the whole of the (heavenly) Book. When they meet you they say: 'We believe', but when they are by themselves they bite their fingers in rage at you. Say: 'Perish in your rage.' Allah knows even what lies hidden in their hearts. (3:118–19)

Muslims should be alert to the risks of taking confidants and consultants from among unbelievers that may lead to 'knowing the particularities of their affairs lest they would divulge them to the enemies from among the people of war'.<sup>22</sup> The following verses (121–22) address the Battle of Uhud, where the hypocrites, who pretended to be believers but acted as enemies of Islam, played a crucial role against the Muslim army in 625.

They long for you to disbelieve even as they disbelieve, so that you may be the same (as them). So do not take *awliā'* from among them until they emigrate in the way of Allah. (4:89)

The context is again about the disbelievers-hypocrites in times of war (4:88 mentions two groups of Muslims with different opinions on the way their hostile behaviour should be counteracted and taking them as protectors and friends in conflicts). The following verse (90) exempts those disbelievers with whom Muslims had covenants or were allies.

Those who take disbelievers for *awliā'* (protectors or helpers or friends) instead of believers, do they seek honour, power and glory with them? Verily, then to Allah belongs all honour, power and glory. (4:139)

Verses 137–38 relate to the status and heavenly punishment of disbelievers and hypocrites 'who believe, then disbelieve, then believe (again), and (again)

22 Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, 2:489. He begins his commentary with reference to the hypocrites. His comment links the verses to a report where Omar, the second Caliph, recommended not to assign a young man from Hira (Iraq) as scribe of his governor in the region. Al-Qurtubi seems to generalize the ruling of the verses and reflects on the dramatic political context of his time stating that 'the situation has changed in current times, by taking the People of the Book as clerks and trustees, that made them prevail, among the ignorant fool rulers and princes'.

disbelieve, and go on increasing in disbelief'. Their position in wartime and pretending faith are further explicated in 4:141–42. Taking them as *awliā'* to seek honour, power, and glory at the cost of faith is mistaken and forbidden in the following verse.

O you who believe! Take not for *awliā'* the disbelievers instead of the believers. Do you wish to offer Allah a manifest proof against yourselves? (4:144)

The verse is often quoted in generic terms on the issue of *al-walā' w'al-barā'*. As mentioned above, it falls into the whole context of 137–145.

O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for *awliā'*. They are friends of one another. And whoever of you takes them for friends is (one) of them. Surely Allah does not guide wrongdoing people. (5:51)

This is one of the most widely quoted verses on the status of Jews and Christians with respect to *al-walā' w'al-barā'*. Verses 5:52–53 put the verse in a specific sequence, supported by the reasons of revelations that report times of military conflicts and making right and wrong alliances.<sup>23</sup>

O you who believe! Take not for *awliā'* those who take your religion for a mockery and fun from among those who received the Scripture before you, nor from among the disbelievers; and fear Allah if you indeed are true believers. (5:57)

Referring to the same group in 5:51, this verse and the following verses add more reasons for disloyalty against them.

Verily, those who believed, and emigrated and strove hard and fought with their property and their lives in the Cause of Allah as well as those who

23 'And you see those in whose hearts there is a disease [of hypocrisy], they hurry to their friendship, saying: "We fear lest some misfortune of a disaster may befall us." Perhaps Allah may bring a victory or a decision according to His Will. Then they will become regretful for what they have been keeping as a secret in themselves. And those who believe will say: "Are these the men (hypocrites) who swore their strongest oaths by Allah that they were with you (Muslims)?" All that they did has been in vain (because of their hypocrisy), and they have become the losers.' Al-Qurtubi comments on the segment as follows: "And whoever of you takes them for friends is (one) of them" means whoever supports them against Muslims "is one of them" ... It was Ibn Ubay [the head of the hypocrites in Medina] who supported them.'

gave (them) asylum and help, these are (all) *awliā'*/allies to one another. And as to those who believed but did not emigrate (to you O Muhammad), you owe no duty of *walāya* [protection] to them until they emigrate, but if they seek your help in religion, it is your duty to help them except against a people with whom you have a treaty of mutual alliance, and Allah is the All-Seer of what you do. The Unbelievers are *awliā'*, one of another: Unless you do this, (protect each other), there would be tumult and oppression on earth, and great mischief. (8:72–73)<sup>24</sup>

Two groups are distinguished in the party of those who are loyal: the *Muhājirūn* (emigrants to Medina) and the *Anṣār* (helper-residents of Medina). The prophet and the Muslims of Medina have no obligation to protect (*walāya*) those who accepted Islam but did not join the Medina state, except for the mentioned cases.<sup>25</sup> Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir report a narration of Ibn Abbas that *awliā'* here refers to the right of inheritance among the emigrants – with the exemption of those who did not emigrate – before the abrogation by the inheritance rulings. Al-Qurtubi states the *fiqh* ruling on supporting and protecting Muslims who do not emigrate from a hostile territory and how they should be rescued if they become prisoners of war. He contextualizes the verses again (see n. 17 above) in his time, as Muslims (apparently in Andalusia) were left as captives of the enemies by their own brothers who had both financial and military means. He interprets verse 73, 'the unbelievers are *awliā'*, one of another', in terms of religious belonging and dealings; for example, a Muslim cannot act as *walīy* (legal guardian) to his disbeliever sister in marriage.

24 Cf. the translation in Muhammad al-Hilālī and Muhammad Khān, *Translation of the Meanings of The Noble Qur'ān in the English Language* (Madinah: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'ān, 1420 H./1999), 208, of verse 73 with superfluous interpretive additions between the brackets: 'And those who disbelieve are allies to one another, (and) if you (Muslims of the whole world collectively) do not do so (i.e. become allies, as one united block with one Khalifah – chief Muslim ruler for the whole Muslim world to make victorious Allah's Religion of Islamic Monotheism), there will be Fitnah (wars, battles, polytheism, etc.) and oppression on earth, and a great mischief and corruption (appearance of polytheism).' They dedicate a long footnote (n. 2) to quote the al-Tabari interpretation and cite hadiths to legally justify the idea of a modern single Muslim Caliphate: 'So it is a legal obligation, from the above-mentioned evident proofs (from the Qur'ān and the Prophet's statement), that there shall not be more than one *Khalifah* (a chief Muslim ruler) for the whole Muslim world or otherwise there will be a great *Fitnah* (mischief and evil) amongst all Muslims, the ultimate results of which will not be worthy of praise.'

25 Ibn Kathir refers to their exemption from *walāya* as war spoils unless they take part in the battles.

O you who believe! Take not for *awliā'* your fathers and your brothers if they prefer disbelief to Belief. And whoever of you does so, then he is one of the wrong-doers. (9:23)

The whole of chapter 9, entitled *Barā'a*, is about freedom from obligations and disassociation from the polytheists and/or pagans of Mecca, except those with whom Muslims have treaties.<sup>26</sup> The verse declares that bonds of kinship cannot be at the cost of belief and of being part of the camp of the believers.

You will not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last Day, loving [*yuwāddūn*] those who resist Allah and His Messenger, even though they were their fathers or their sons, or their brothers, or their kindred. For such He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself. And He will admit them to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow, to dwell therein (forever). Allah will be well pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the Party of Allah. Truly it is the Party of Allah that will achieve Felicity. (58:22)

Different reports on the reasons of revelation narrate how some companions of the prophet reacted against their own kin, antagonists of Islam among hypocrites and pagans, in battles and disputes for the sake of the prophet and Islam.

O believers, take not My enemy and your enemy for *awliā'*, offering them love [*mawaddā*], though they have disbelieved in the truth that has come to you, expelling the Messenger and you because you believe in God your Lord. If you go forth to struggle in My way and seek My good pleasure, secretly loving them, yet I know very well what you conceal and what

26 The contemporary Salafi-jihadi theorist Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959) introduces his work (*Millat Ibrahīm*, minbar al-tawhid wa 'l-jihad, n.d., 1, accessed 15 May 2021, [https://archive.org/details/Melt\\_Ebraheem](https://archive.org/details/Melt_Ebraheem)) with a front page entitled *Barā'a* and numerates the groups addressed in the following way: 'to the tyrants in every time and place; to the tyrants whether rulers, princes, Caesars, Khusro's, Pharaohs and kings; to their entourage and perversive [religious] scholars, to their supporters/friends/protectors [*awliā'*], armies, police, secret services and guards; to all of them ... we say "Surely we disassociate ourselves from you [*burā'a'*] and all that you worship beside Allah" [Q. 60:4]; *Barā'* [disassociated] from your laws, methods/curricula, constitutions and rotten principles; *Barā'* from your governments, courts, slogans and musty flags; "we have rejected you, and there has arisen, between us an you, enmity and hatred for ever – unless ye believe in Allah and Him alone"[Q. 60.4].'

you publish; and whosoever of you does that, has gone astray from the right way. (60:1)

This frequently quoted verse in *al-walā' w'al-barā'* discourse is unanimously reported to have been revealed about the story of the companion Ḥāṭib ibn Abi Balta'a. Before the conquest of Mecca in 630 – due to the breaking of the treaty between the Quraishites and the Muslims – Ḥāṭib, who was not a native of Quraish, feared that his kin and properties in Mecca would be attacked by the pagans, as he did not enjoy clan protection. He secretly sent a message with a woman to the Meccans warning them about the intended conquest. This act of treason in times of war was revealed to the prophet, and he sent other companions to trace the woman and bring back Ḥāṭib's letter. Ḥāṭib explained his true intention to the prophet and was dismissed. Al-Qurtubi interprets the term love [*mawadda*] by 'giving them advice in messages', referring to the act and message of Ḥāṭib to the pagans of Quraish.

There is a good example for you in Ibrahim and those with him, when they told their people: 'Surely we disassociate ourselves from you [*bura'a*] and all that you worship beside Allah. We have done with you. And there has arisen between us and you enmity and hate forever until you believe in Allah only.' (60:4)

As Ibn Kathir states, verses 1–4 were revealed together in the same context of the story of Ḥāṭib. The analogy of the story of Ibrahim with his kin is given as an exemplar to be followed.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, verses 8–9 of the same chapter are, almost always, quoted in Muslim literature and modern apologetic discourse about the inclusiveness and tolerance of Islam towards followers of other beliefs and worldviews. I will discuss the exegetic implications of 60:8–9 in the following paragraph.

The Qur'ānic narrative on the issue of loyalty and disavowal is thus, in almost all cases, related to situations of interreligious conflicts, competing coalitions, and menacing amities with enemies where belongings and loyalties cannot be negotiable. The reasons of revelation clarify how hypocrites, or in other cases some Muslims, deliberately or unintentionally put the security

27 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (*Millat Ibrahim*, 5–11), who opens his book with quotations from this verse, as mentioned above, cites the verse again, among others, as rebuttal against the opponents of his theory on *barā'* as being an 'unequivocal, clear and explicit text' on disloyalty against all kinds of disbelievers and the 'tyrants' of our times who take them as allies and friends. In his view, this 'dismantles the foundations of *al-walā' w'al-barā'*'.

of their state and the integrity of their faith at risk. This includes choosing the side of enemies, showing them amity and support, and disclosing strategic secrets for the sake of protection, honour, or power.

### What about Verses 60:8–9?

The abovementioned verses 60:1, 4 are generalized beyond their context of revelation to the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the same chapter, verse 8 entails injunctions to deal 'kindly and justly' with non-Muslims and emerges in all Muslim pluralistic discourse as the verse *par excellence* on Islamic tolerance and justice.

Allah forbids you with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from not dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are just. Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong.

Classical interpretive traditions seemed to struggle with apparently contradictory implications of the 'pro-tolerant' and 'anti-tolerant' verses altogether. A theory of abrogation (*naskh*) was required to offer a solution – namely that all verses urging tolerant relations and peaceful dealings with non-Muslims are abrogated by later revealed verses, especially the so-called 'sword verse' (Q. 9:5). Utilizing this approach, among other justifications, enabled contemporary militant groups such as ISIS to claim that Islam is the 'religion of the sword not pacifism'.<sup>28</sup> Several classical scholars and early exegetes held the opinion that 9:5 has a conclusive abrogative legal force over all or many other verses with injunctions promoting forgiveness, amnesty, and tolerance, especially verse 60:8. The list includes Muqatil Ibn Suleyman Al-Balkhi (d. 767; 16 verses), Hibatullah Ibn Salama (d. 1020; 60:8 is abrogated by 60:9 and both are abrogated by the 'sword verse'), Ibn Khuzayma (d. after 1097; 116 verses) and Abu Bakr Ibn Al-Arabi (d. 1148; 114 verses).<sup>29</sup> Both al-Tabari (d. 923), the father of exegetes, and the modern *naskh*

<sup>28</sup> ISIS, 'From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone', *Dabiq* 7 (1436/2015), 20–24.

<sup>29</sup> Ellethy, *Islam, Context*, 118.



expert Mustapha Zayd (d. 1978) rebut the *naskh* claims and standardize the ruling in 60:8 as unequivocal and conclusive. Al-Tabari sees no sense in the *naskh* claim and states that the relative pronoun 'those' mentioned in the verse includes everyone who does not fight Muslims on account of their faith nor drives them out of their homes, with no restrictions. His words seem to connect the verse to loyalty and disavowal. Even in times of war, benevolence toward one's kin or others in general is the rule; the exception is 'as long as it is not related to a disclosure of the secrets of the Muslims to *ahl al-ḥarb* or supporting them with horses and weapons'.<sup>30</sup>

Based on the discussion above, it becomes legitimate to ask whether the notion of *al-walā' w'al-barā'* forms a '*aqīda*' that can be generalized to the different aspects of the relation between Muslims on the one side and the 'rest' on the other side. The Qur'ānic discourse stresses the obligations: not to jeopardize public interests in times of war and conflict; not to take enemies as allies at the cost of religious and political loyalties; to stand firm in faith issues; to avoid hypocritical attitudes; and to be loyal to one's religious category (Islam), which demands a Muslim to deal kindly and justly with every 'other' beyond these exceptional cases.<sup>31</sup> From this perspective loyalties can converge for a 'common good', but disloyalties cannot be tolerated in cases of 'common risk'. This brings us to the question of apostasy and whether it can be framed in light of the notion of loyalty and disavowal.

### *Ridda* (Apostasy) as Disloyalty

The jurisprudential evidences for apostasy in Islamic theology, unlike that of loyalty and disavowal, are extracted from the Sunnah and its narrated reports, the hadiths. The Qur'ān affirms freedom of belief in more than two hundred verses.<sup>32</sup> Several modern scholars have reconstructed the *fiqh* reasoning on apostasy and posed serious questions, partly on the authenticity and authority of the hadiths and partly on the *ratio legis* behind the punishment against it. In terms of the latter, they reflect on whether apostasy involves mere renunciation of religious belief or has further implications

30 Al-Tabari, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy Al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dar Al-Salam, 2008), 10:7993–95; Ellethy, *Islam, Context*, 117–18.

31 See Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Ghayr al-Muslimīn fī al-Mujtama' al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1992), 72–75.

32 I have discussed the controversy on apostasy between the Qur'ān and hadith more extensively in Yaser Ellethy 'Islam, staat, democratie en godsdienstvrijheid: een islamitisch perspectief', *Tijdschrift Kerk en Recht* 2 (2019): 137–58.

for the Muslim community and state. This take on apostasy sees it as an act that 'must be distinguished from the more general use of the term that refers to simple leavetaking', as David Bromley notes in his relevant work.<sup>33</sup>

In his discussion of freedom of religion in Islam, Mohammad Kamali problematizes the controversy on the issue and attributes it partly to the 'drastic conclusions' of some commentators on how some Qur'ānic passages on fighting the unbelievers abrogate the Qur'ānic proclamation on tolerance and respect for other religions, and partly to reliance on hadiths which authorize the death penalty for apostasy without due consideration to other Sunnah evidences that this punishment was solely meant for apostasy accompanied by hostility and treason.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, as al-Tabari clearly concludes above on the tolerance-*naskh* claims, the cases exempting from tolerance toward the 'others' even in wartime are to be validated by supporting *ahl al-ḥarb* logistically or materially. As for the liaison between apostasy, hostility, and treason, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) described similar acts of the apostates of his time who were originally Muslims (among Arabs, Persians, and others) and supported the enemies of Islam as more dangerous and worse than those 'original disbelievers', with the exception of Muslims who were coerced to fight on the enemy's side.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, some hadiths, mostly left out of discussion by the opponents of the death penalty for mere faith renunciation, may offer challenging arguments. The hadith of Mu'adh ibn Jabal and Abu Musa al-Ash'arī is a telling example of high authenticity (reported in the canonical collections of both al-Bukhari and Muslim):

A man embraced Islam and then reverted back to Judaism. Mu'adh bin Jabal came and saw the man with Abū Mūsa. Mu'adh asked, 'What is wrong with this (man)?' Abū Mūsa replied, 'He embraced Islam and then reverted back to Judaism.' Mu'adh said, 'I will not sit down unless [until] you [I in the Arabic text] kill him (as it is) the verdict of Allah and His Messenger.'<sup>36</sup>

33 David Bromley, 'The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistleblowers, and Apostates' in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David Bromley (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 19–48 (p. 19).

34 Mohammad Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 92–93.

35 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-Fatāwa* (Al-Mansura: Dar Al-Wafaa, 2005), 28:535, 291.

36 Al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahīh Al-Bukhārī. Arabic-English*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997) 9:168–69, hadith 7157. The translator renders the pronoun 'I' mistakenly as 'you'. It is remarkable how al-Bukhari classifies the hadith

Although this hadith does not link the punishment of apostasy to rebellion or disloyalty against the state, the context and circumstances of the exact situation are totally unknown. The same companion-narrator of the hadith (Abu Burda) narrates another hadith on the sending of both Mu'adh and Abu Musa to Yemen, upon which the prophet instructed them, 'Make things easy for the people and do not make things difficult for them; give them glad tidings and do not repel them; and you both love each other, and don't differ.'<sup>37</sup> Moreover, another hadith reported in the *Muwatta'* of Malik mentions the disapproval of the second Caliph Umar regarding a man punished by death for apostasy in Iraq, where Abu Musa was Omar's governor:

A man came to 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb at the behest of Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī, who was 'Umar's governor in Iraq at the time. 'Umar asked him about the people's affairs, and the man gave him a report. 'Umar then asked him, 'Do you have any strange news?' He said, 'Yes, a man became an unbeliever after he had embraced Islam.' 'Umar said, 'What did you do with him?' He said, 'We arrested him and then executed him.' 'Umar said, 'Why didn't you detain him for three days, feeding him every day a loaf of bread, and call on him to repent, in the hope that he would repent and return to God's way?' 'Umar then exclaimed, 'O God! I was not present; I did not give any orders; and I certainly was not pleased by the news when it reached me!'<sup>38</sup>

It might be said that Omar was only willing to give the man the three-day interval to repent and did not reject the punishment itself. However, another hadith reports that he was informed about a group of six people from the

under a sub-chapter entitled 'A governor (of a province, etc.) who is under the *Imām* can sentence to death a person who deserves such punishment without consulting the *Imām*', and classifies the same content in hadith 6923 under 'Asking repentance from the apostates and obstinate people [rejecters of faith] and fighting them'; cf. Muslim, *English Translation of Sahih Muslim. Arabic-English*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 5:151–52, hadith 4718. 37 Al-Bukhari, *The Translation*, 4:169, 3038. Cf. 4341–42, 4344–45, 7157. The one narration (4341–42) reports that Abu Musa ordered the man to be killed (as in Muslim 4718), the others (4344–45, 7157) that Mu'adh said 'I will chop off his neck' and 'I will not sit down until I kill him', both attributed to Abu Burda as well. These different wordings problematize the context of the narration.

38 Malik Ibn Anas, *Al-Muwatta'*, ed. and trans. Mohammad Fadel and Connell Monette (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), book 35 (The Book of Judicial Rulings [*Aqdīya*]), 615, hadith 2159. Cf. Jonathan Brown, *The Issue of Apostasy in Islam* (Irving, TX: Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2017), 20, who presumably confuses the accident with the one in al-Bukhari (hadith 7157 above, n. 33) during the period of the prophet.

tribe of Bakr ibn Wa'il 'who renounced Islam and joined the polytheists' upon the conquest of Tustar and were killed in the battlefield. Omar denounced this and responded to the question whether there was another way to deal with them by saying, 'Yes! I would have invited them to [re] enter Islam, and if they rejected, I would have put them in jail.'<sup>39</sup> According to Ibn Hazm, the opinion of Omar was that one should ask for repentance unceasingly from the captive apostate.<sup>40</sup> This has raised more questions on the right of a captive apostate who even joined the enemies to be called back to their loyalty to the Muslim state.

In most historical cases, apostasy in that pre-modern political context entailed disloyalty against the state, breaking with its system, and jeopardizing its socio-political unity. Renouncing one's faith was a matter beyond mere freedom of religion and involved disassociation with the Muslim community and taking the enemy's side in military conflicts. This may explain the refusal of the prophet to kill the hypocrites in Medina, as they did not fight their Muslim co-citizens and, albeit reluctantly, joined them in defending Medina.<sup>41</sup> It may also justify the legal choice of the Hanafi's not to punish an apostate woman by death, as she would not engage in deeds related to fighting and violent acts. The Hanafi scholar Ibn al-Humam (d. 1457) explains the reason behind the death penalty for apostasy and excluding women from it: 'It is necessary to punish apostasy with death in order to avert the evil of war, not as punishment for the act of unbelief, because the greatest punishment for that is with God. It is thus specifically meant for whom would be capable of fighting [*hirāb*]: the man.'<sup>42</sup> In this capacity, Jonathan Brown gives a list of apostates since the prophetic and formative periods of Islam over the centuries, who were not punished because they did not threaten the public order.<sup>43</sup> Thence, *ridda*, in the context of a premodern

39 Al-Bayhaqi, *Al-Sunan al-Kubra* (Haiderabad: Majlis Da'irat al-Ma'arif al-Uthmaniyya, 1354 H./1935–36), 8:207.

40 Ibn Hazm, *Al-Işāl fi'l-Muḥalla bi'l-Athār* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 12:113–16.

41 See Y. Gad, *Al-Ridda wa Ḥurriyat al-F'tiqād: Ro'ya Islāmiyya Jadīda* (Doha: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies–Doha Institute, 2011), 13–14; Ellethy, 'Islam, staat', 154, n. 41.

42 Ibn al-Humam, *Sharḥ Faṭḥ al-Qadīr* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 6: 68; Wahbah Al-Zuhayli, *Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuh* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1985), 187–88. The translation is in major part quoted in Brown, *The Issue of Apostasy*, 19.

43 Brown, *The Issue of Apostasy*, 14–18. He cites the relevant article by Christian Sahner, 'Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 2 (2016): 265–84. He also gives (15) the example of 'Ubaydallāh bin Jaḥsh (one of the Muslim refugees in Christian Abyssinia who, upon the prophet's advice, fled the persecution of the pagans of Mecca) who converted to Christianity, and the prophet did not order him punished.

state, included disengagement from the community, change of allegiance, and therefore enmity with the former socio-political context.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

The notion of *walā'* implies support, help, love, and showing honour and respect to those in proximity or to likeminded people both inwardly and/or outwardly. In theological terms it concerns God, his messenger, and the believers. On the other hand, *barā'* denotes getting rid of, disavowal of, distancing from, disassociating oneself from, and showing enmity to something/someone. Again, in this respect, it concerns the enemies of God, his messenger, and the believers. Some classical and modern scholars classify it as a creed (*'aqīda*) which can be invoked to characterize the relation between Muslims and the 'other' in general. Denial of this 'creed' as 'tailored' and advocated by its adamant supporters might lead to declaring the denier as apostate and non-Muslim. Paradoxically, both the Islamic legal methodology and the prophetic practice since the very establishment of the Medina state show that loyalty can be a trans-religious bond where Muslims and non-Muslims share socio-political values and stand for them together beyond (non)denominational affiliations. It is true that loyalty and disloyalty can constitute core notions in each faith system that distinguishes between belief and unbelief. However, the pluralistic Islamic view draws clear borderlines between *credo* and *tractatio*.

As for the verses used to justify *al-walā' w' al-barā'*, in almost all cases they relate to situations of interreligious conflicts, competing coalitions, and menacing amities with enemies where belongings and loyalties cannot be negotiable. The reasons of revelation clarify how hypocrites, and in other cases some Muslims, deliberately or unintentionally put the security of their state and the integrity of their faith at stake. This includes choosing the enemy side, showing them amity and support, and disclosing strategic secrets for the sake of protection, honour, or power. Verse 60:8, vehemently and sometimes apologetically invoked by Muslims to defend Islamic pluralism, standardizes the ruling of kind and just treatment of non-Muslims as unequivocal and conclusive. Finally, the liaison between apostasy and disloyalty lies in the fact that *ridda*, in a premodern context, included disengagement from the community, change of allegiance, and therefore enmity with the former socio-political context. It is the case, though, that

44 Ellethy, 'Islam, staat', 156.

the scholars who support the death penalty for every unrepentant apostate remain influential. The burden lies on the official *fiqh* and collective fatwa councils to establish a politically binding theological substantiation of these controversial issues,<sup>45</sup> especially when existing modern and classical authoritative reasoning forms a solid ground to build on.

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45 Ellethy, 'Islam, staat', 156.



## 12 Apostasy in Islam: An Overview of Sources and Positions

*Razi H. Quadir*

### Abstract

Apostasy in Islam is a topical issue. Apostasy is a criminal offence in certain Muslim-majority countries, sometimes subject to capital punishment. Although all forms of leaving Islam boil down to apostasy, it seems that historically and in our current time, conversion to Christianity is the most sensitive. According to most Muslim scholars, apostasy in Islam is tantamount to high treason and rebellion, making it a political crime. Modern Muslim scholars who object to the death penalty for apostasy argue that an apostate cannot be killed for merely the probability of demonstrating hostility or taking up arms toward the Muslim community. They also argue that the Qur'ān guarantees freedom of religion and that the Prophet Muḥammad never killed anyone for apostasy.

**Keywords:** Islam, apostasy, freedom of religion, death penalty, *ḥudūd* crimes, high treason

### Introduction

Apostasy in Islam is a sensitive and topical subject. In certain Muslim majority countries, apostasy is a punishable offence, including by the death penalty,<sup>1</sup> even though some of these countries have embraced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of religion.<sup>2</sup> The

1 Angelina E. Theodorou, 'Which Countries Still Outlaw Apostasy and Blasphemy', Pew Research Center, accessed 23 June 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/29/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/>.

2 Article 18 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief,



issue of apostasy in Islam is further complicated in countries where large numbers of both Christians and Muslims reside. This chapter explores the definition and scope of apostasy in Islam. The sources of apostasy and the different positions of Muslim scholars regarding it will also be reviewed in answering the two following questions:

1. What is the theological standpoint concerning apostasy with respect to Christianity? I will point out here that apostasy constitutes any act of leaving Islam in Islamic jurisprudence. Thus, the rulings for apostasy in Islam are general, and there is no specific ruling for apostasy in Islam with respect to Christianity. However, it appears that conversion from Islam to Christianity is more sensitive than switching from Islam to another religion.
2. What are the different opinions among Muslim scholars – both classical and contemporary – regarding apostasy in Islam? Are there any different interpretations regarding capital punishment for apostasy in Islam? In answering this question, I will expound on the different opinions of Muslim scholars regarding apostasy and its punishment.

## Apostasy in Islam

Apostasy in Islam, or *al-riddah* (or *al-irtidād*), is defined as voluntarily renouncing Islam. A person who renounces Islam is called *murtadd*.<sup>3</sup> There is no distinction in Islam between leaving, that is, apostasy, and conversion from Islam to another religion. Thus, whether a Muslim converts to Christianity or Judaism or becomes an atheist, this all amounts to apostasy, and such a person is considered an apostate (*murtadd*). Nevertheless, in some cases, apostasy is more sensitive than in others. For example, in countries

and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance', <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>, accessed 23 June 2021.

3 William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984, repr. 2003), I: 1061, 1065. There are more actions that are tantamount to *al-riddah*, such as the rejection of the fundamental articles of faith (*imān*) like the existence of Allah, the Qur'ān, the Prophets, denying or ridiculing obligatory duties in Islam like prayer (*ṣalāh*), or throwing the Qur'ān in a filthy place. However, this is beyond the scope of this article. For more information see Sayyid Sābiq, *Fiqh us-Sunnah*, trans. F. Amira Zrein Matraji (Beirut: Dār el Fikr, 1996), 3: 326; 'Abdur Raḥmān I. Doi, *Sharī'ah: The Islamic Law* (London: TaHa Publishers, 1997), 265; Nu'mān 'Abd al-Razzāq Al-Sāmarā'i, *Aḥkām al-Murtadd fi'l-Sharī'ah al-Islāmīyah* (Riyadh: Dār al-'Ulūm li al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1983), 61–113.

where large numbers of both Christians and Muslims reside or Muslim countries with Christian minorities, the situation is extremely precarious when it comes to apostasy in Islam.<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see later, the vast majority of Muslim scholars believe that a *murtadd* is liable to the death penalty. The contemporary scholar Yohanan Friedmann notes that, historically speaking, capital punishment for apostasy is not unique to Islam. After all, civilizations such as the Byzantines and the Sassanids also implemented capital punishment for apostasy. Similarly, Christianity and Judaism treated apostasy and apostates in a harsh manner.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, much like Muslims, Christians and Jews took a severe stance on idolatry because this is a form of apostasy in these three religions. Although it is likely that only a few people converted to Christianity, Zoroastrianism, or Judaism under Islamic rule in medieval times, Muslim jurists set out rules regarding apostasy. Muslim scholars distinguish between non-Muslims already adhering to a religion before the rise of Islam and those who converted to such a religion later. Adherence to the Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian community when Islam was not yet in existence is acceptable because it is considered within the natural order of things. Continuing to belong to these religions after the rise of Islam is lamentable but tolerated. According to some Muslim scholars, what is controversial and not to be accepted is embracing one of these religions during the Muslim era (even when no apostasy from Islam is involved). According to some Muslim scholars, such converts should be banished from the land of Islam. Although it is unknown if Muslim governments carried out any banishments according to this ruling, it reflects a general view that after the rise of Islam, followers of non-Muslim religions should not increase in number.<sup>6</sup>

4 An example of such a country is Nigeria, in which 48.1 percent of its population is Christian and 50 percent is Muslim. Constituent states in Nigeria are given the power to establish their own Sharia courts on civil matters by Sections 275–79 of the Nigerian Constitution. Some states require Muslims to abide by Sharia law, but Christians are not obliged in any of the twelve northern states of Nigeria to abide by Sharia law. In order to prevent ethnic conflict, it is illegal to proselytize in some states. While religious discrimination is forbidden by law, there are significant inter-religious social tensions. For example, Muslims have complained about being denied permission to construct mosques in predominantly Christian states. Likewise, Christians in the predominantly Muslim states have asserted that local government employed zoning laws to delay or prevent the construction of new churches. See Humanists International, 'Nigeria', last updated 30 November 2020, <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/nigeria/>.

5 Yohanan Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

6 Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 7–8.

## Legal Punishment for Apostasy in Islam

In this section, I discuss the different positions of Muslim scholars regarding apostasy. The primary sources for the Islamic law or *Shari'a* are the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the collected narrations of the Prophet Muḥammad). As I shall point out in this section, the discussion concerning the legal punishment for apostasy in Islam revolves around the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

### Muslim Scholars in Favour of the Death Penalty for Apostasy

The overwhelming majority of both classical and modern scholars view apostasy as impermissible and consider it mandatory to put an unrepentant apostate to death. Whereas Muslim scholars differ about repentance, it appears that a majority find that the apostate should be given the opportunity to repent. For example, Imam Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), the founder of the Ḥanafī legal school, rules that asking an apostate to repent is preferable but not obligatory. According to him, the narration 'whoever changes his religion, kill him' specifies the capital punishment for an apostate but does not state the obligation to seek his repentance prior to his planned execution.<sup>7</sup> The scholars Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (according to one report), Ḥassan al-Baṣri (d. 728), al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933), and Ṭāwūs (d. 724) believe that the repentance of apostates will never be accepted, and therefore the apostate should be killed at once.<sup>8</sup>

Although Muslim scholars primarily use a number of hadith in order to underpin their argument for the death penalty for apostasy in Islam, they also employ some Qur'ānic verses, which I present below.

They [the pagans of Mecca] ask you O Prophet about fighting in the sacred months. Say, 'Fighting during these months is a great sin. But hindering others from the Path of Allah, rejecting Him, and expelling the worshippers from the Sacred Mosque is a greater sin in the sight of Allah. For persecution [persecuting Muslims to abandon their faith] is far worse than killing. And they will not stop fighting you until they turn you away from your faith – if they can. And whoever among you renounces their own faith and dies a disbeliever, their deeds will become void in this life

7 Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 127.

8 Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 127.

and in the Hereafter. It is they who will be the residents of the Fire. They will be there forever.<sup>9</sup> (2:217)

How shall Allah guide a people who disbelieved after their belief and had witnessed that the Messenger is true and clear signs had come to them? And Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people. Those – their recompense will be that upon them is the curse of Allah and the angels and the people, all together, Abiding eternally therein. The punishment will not be lightened for them, nor will they be reprieved. Except for those who repent after that and correct themselves. For indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. Indeed, those who reject the message after their belief and then increase in disbelief – never will their [claimed] repentance be accepted, and they are the ones astray.<sup>10</sup> (3:86–90)

Indeed, those who believed then disbelieved, then believed and again disbelieved – only increasing in disbelief – Allah will neither forgive them nor guide them to the Right Way.<sup>11</sup> (4:137)

O believers! Whoever among you abandons their faith, Allah will replace them with others who love Him and are loved by Him. They will be humble with the believers but firm towards the disbelievers, struggling in the Way of Allah; fearing no blame from anyone. This is the favour of Allah. He grants it to whoever He wills. And Allah is All-Bountiful, All-Knowing.<sup>12</sup> (5:54)

Make no excuse; you have disbelieved after your belief. If We pardon one faction of you – We will punish another faction because they were criminals.<sup>13</sup> (9:66)

They swear by Allah that they did not say [anything against the Prophet] while they had said the word of disbelief and disbelieved after their [pretence of] Islam and planned that which they were not to attain. And they were not resentful except [for the fact] that Allah and His Messenger had enriched them of His bounty. So, if they repent, it is better for them;

9 Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*, <https://quran.com/2>, accessed 15 June 2022.

10 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/3>, accessed 15 June 2022.

11 Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*, <https://quran.com/4>, accessed 15 June 2022.

12 Khattab, *The Clear Quran*, <https://quran.com/4>.

13 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/9>, accessed 15 June 2022.

but if they turn away, Allah will punish them with a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter. And there will not be for them on earth any protector or helper.<sup>14</sup> (9:74)

Whoever disbelieves in Allah after their belief – not those who are forced while their hearts are firm in faith, but those who embrace disbelief wholeheartedly – they will be condemned by Allah and suffer a tremendous punishment. This is because they prefer the life of this world over the Hereafter. Surely Allah never guides those who choose to disbelieve.<sup>15</sup> (16: 106–107)

Indeed, those who reverted back [to disbelief] after guidance had become clear to them – Satan enticed them and prolonged hope for them. That is because they said to those who disliked what Allah sent down, ‘We will obey you in part of the matter.’ And Allah knows what they conceal. Then how [will it be] when the angels take them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they followed what angered Allah and disliked [what earns] His pleasure, so He rendered worthless their deeds.<sup>16</sup> (47:25–28)

From this brief overview, we can conclude that, notwithstanding that in the Qur’ān apostasy is viewed as a heinous sin, it does not mention any earthly punishment for it. Rather, it is up to God to judge the apostate in the Hereafter.<sup>17</sup> Although the Qur’ān appears to be quite clear on apostasy, namely that there is no penalty in this world, the Sunnah is unequivocal about it. The Sunnah, which is the collected teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad, is known through the *aḥādīth*, that is, the reports of the Prophet deemed authentic. The Sunnah encompasses his sayings, actions, and tacit approval.

The overwhelming majority of the Muslim scholars rely on the verbal hadith ‘whoever changes his religion, kill him’,<sup>18</sup> with the corollary that the

14 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/9>.

15 Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*, <https://quran.com/16>, accessed 15 June 2022.

16 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/47>, accessed 15 June 2022.

17 For example, the scholar Doi states that the Qur’ān explains the enormity of the crime and sin of apostasy and refers to the *aḥādīth* in which the punishment for it is prescribed. See ‘Abdur Raḥmān I. Doi, *Sharī‘ah: The Islamic Law*, 265–66.

18 Muḥammad Ibn-Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī: The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Arabic – English, trans. Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salaam, 1997), 4:159, hadith no. 3017 and 9: 46, hadith no. 6922; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, trans. Ahmad Hasan, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990, repr. 2003), 3:1212, hadith no. 4337; Muḥammad Ibn ‘Isa al-Tirmidhi, *Jāmi‘ Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Tirmidhi: The Translation of The*

apostate should be executed. This hadith, which is collected by a number of scholars of hadith including al-Bukhāri, is considered authentic by the vast majority of Muslim scholars.

Another hadith on which the proponents for capital punishment for apostasy in Islam rely and which is also deemed to be authentic by most Muslim scholars is the following:

The blood of a Muslim, who confesses that there is no God but Allah and that I am His Apostle, cannot be shed except in three cases: In Qiṣās [retaliation] for murder, a married person who commits adultery and the one who reverts from Islam [apostates] and leaves the [Muslim] community.<sup>19</sup>

This hadith, which is narrated by ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ūd, was added by both al-Bukhāri and Muslim to their collections. Al-Shawkānī, in his commentary on this hadith, explicates the difference between the *ẓāhir* (ostensible) meaning of ‘abandoning faith’ in the hadith (that *ridḍa* in whatsoever form of *kufr* entails punishment by death), on the one hand, and the intentional ‘full abandoning’, ‘leaving the community’, and ‘stepping out of Islam’, on the other. Thus, according to al-Shawkānī, leaving the Muslim community can only happen through unbelief, thus by becoming an apostate, and cannot merely be done by committing rebellion (*al-baġhy*) or heterodoxy (*al-ibtidā‘*) and the like. Al-Shawkānī goes on to comment that it is permissible for each Muslim individual to kill an aggressor (*bāġhī*) or similar who is eager to kill them or take their property. This hadith purports to indicate that the only reason behind a person’s leaving the religion of Islam and the Muslim community is their (accepting) unbelief, such as what has been explained with the words of the Prophet in another narration, ‘or becoming an unbeliever after accepting Islam’ (*bal al-murādu bi-l-tark li-l-dīn wa-l-mufāraqah li-l-jamā‘ah al-kufr faqaṭ kamā yadallu ‘ala dhalika qawlu-hu fi l-ḥadīthi al-‘ākhar*).<sup>20</sup>

*Meaning of Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī with Explanatory Notes and Brief Biographical Sketches of Major Narrators*, trans. Rafique Abdur Rehman, 2 vols. (Karachi: Darul – Ishaat, 2007), Jami‘ Tirmidhi, 1:623, hadith no. 1463.

<sup>19</sup> al-Bukhāri, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, 9:20, hadith no. 6878; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajāj al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: The Authentic ḥadīths of Muslim with Full Arabic Text*, trans. Muḥammad Maḥdi Sharīf, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-‘Ilmiyah, 2005), 3:208, hadith no. 1676.

<sup>20</sup> Muḥammad Ibn Ali ibn Muḥammad ibn Abdullah Al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-Awṭār: Sharḥ Muntaqā al-akḥbār min aḥādīth Sayyid al-Akhyār* (Beirut: Dar el-Marefah, 2002), 2: 1472–73.

At this point it is worth taking a closer look at two situations concerning apostasy that are particularly highlighted in the position of the Ḥanafī school of law: the situation of female apostates, and apostasy as a political crime. The overwhelming majority of classical and modern Muslim scholars do not distinguish between a male and a female apostate; both deserve capital punishment. Among these Muslim scholars are the founders of the current Sunni schools of law Imam Mālik (d. 795), Imam al-Shāfi'i (d. 820), and Imam ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855). However, the founder of the Ḥanafī school of law, Imam Abū Ḥanīfa, and all the Ḥanafī scholars differentiate between male and female apostates. Although they too hold that a male apostate is to be executed, they argue that a female apostate should be imprisoned and invited back to Islam but never be killed. Their argument is that a female apostate is not active in combat or capable of warfare.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Ḥanafī scholars reason, older men from whom no progeny can be expected and hermaphrodites are both saved from the death penalty.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it seems that the Ḥanafī school of law views apostasy as a political crime. Females, older men, and hermaphrodites are, in their view, incapable of fighting and engaging in combat. Therefore, they pose no danger to the community, even if they are apostates. This is further underpinned by the fact that both classical and modern Ḥanafī jurists discuss the subject of apostasy within the framework of *siyār*, referring to the international Islamic law. The manuals of Islamic jurisprudence that deal with the subject of *siyār* discuss different rulings of the so-called two abodes: 'the abode of Islam' (*dar al Islam*) and the abode of war (*dār al ḥarb*).<sup>23</sup> For example, the famous work *Siyār* by the classical scholar Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 804 or 805), which has also been translated into English as *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyār*, discusses, among other things, the different rulings on apostates in the abode of Islam and the abode of war.<sup>24</sup> Also, the late scholar Muhammad Hamidullah (d. 2002) discusses a number of

21 Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyār* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 205. See also S. A. Rahman, *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1996), 122, where the Ḥanafī scholar Sarakhsī is quoted: 'And in this there is specification that justification for killing is on the ground of *qitāl* (fighting) and women do not participate in fighting.'

22 Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2012), 187; Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations*, 209.

23 Taha Jabir Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*, trans. Nancy Roberts (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011), 100–101.

24 Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations*, 195–229.

rulings about the apostates in the land of Islam and in non-Muslim territory and argues that an apostate in the Islamic territory has to choose between Islam or execution. If the apostate escapes to a non-Muslim territory, 'his property in the Islamic territory will be distributed among his Muslim heirs as if he were dead'.<sup>25</sup>

The contemporary scholar Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid gives four reasons for the harsh punishment for apostasy on his famous website [islamqa.info](http://islamqa.info):

1 – This punishment is a deterrent to anyone who wants to enter Islam just to follow the crowd or for hypocritical purposes. This will motivate him to examine the matter thoroughly and not to proceed unless he understands the consequences of that in this world and in the Hereafter. The one who announces his Islam has agreed to adhere to all the rulings of Islam of his own free will and consent, one of which rulings is that he is to be executed if he apostatizes from the faith.

2 – The one who announces his Islam has joined the *jamaa'ah* (main body) of the Muslims, and whoever joins the main body of the Muslims is required to be completely loyal and to support it and protect it against anything that may lead to *fitnah* or destroy it or cause division. Apostasy from Islam means forsaking the *jamaa'ah* and its divine order, and has a harmful effect on it. Execution is the greatest deterrent that will prevent people from committing such a crime.

3 – Those Muslims who are weak in faith and others who are against Islam may think that the apostate has only left Islam because of what he has found out about its real nature, because if it were the truth then he would never have turned away from it. So they learn from him all the doubts, lies and fabrications which are aimed at extinguishing the light of Islam and putting people off from it. In this case executing the apostate is obligatory, in order to protect the true religion from the defamation of the liars and to protect the faith of its adherents and remove obstacles from the path of those who are entering the faith.

4 – We also say that the death penalty exists in the modern laws of man to protect the system from disorder in some situations and to protect society against certain crimes which may cause its disintegration, such as drugs etc. If execution can serve as a deterrent to protect man-made systems, then it is more appropriate that the true religion of Allaah, which Falsehood cannot come to it from before it or behind it [cf. *Fussilat* 41:42],

25 Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State*, 187–88.



and which is all goodness, happiness and tranquillity in this world and in the Hereafter should punish those who commit acts of aggression against it and seek to extinguish its light and defame its image, and who fabricate lies against it to justify their apostasy and deviation.<sup>26</sup>

Points 2 and 4 highlight the political and social nature of apostasy. The apostate is conceived as someone who is disloyal to the Muslim community and constitutes an imminent threat to this community. The apostate is also viewed as someone who causes disintegration of the Muslim society, which cannot be accepted. This line of reasoning coincides with the following words expressed by the modern scholar al-Sāmarā'i:

Again, Islam is not merely a religion but also a nationality (*jinsīyah*), and rebellion against it would mean deprivation of this nationality. For such an act would be treachery and change from co-citizenship to enmity, as has been explained by Shaikh Aḥmad Ibrāhīm (in *Majallat al-Qānūn al-Miṣrīyyah*). The apostate causes others to imagine that Islam is lacking in goodness and thus prevents them from (accepting) it. Consequently, he commits an offence not only against his own person but against others also. A disbeliever, if he sticks to disbelief, is excusable in the eye of people, for one reason or another. But, after he has been introduced to Islam and has been united with his Maker, what is his excuse? says Sayyid Quṭb (in his *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*): Disbelief that precedes belief is forgiven. For one who has not seen the light may be excused if he walks in darkness. But for disbelief after acceptance of the Faith, there can be no forgiveness and no excuse. Verily disbelief is a veil. When it is lifted, man's nature is united with his Maker, the strayed camel is joining to the caravan and the plant is connected with its source-spring. Those who become renegades after that, they calumniate their nature, deliberately insist on their error and adopt arrogance and waywardness. There is no forgiveness after that and no guidance. They lead their souls voluntarily towards destruction and specially when apostasy is repeatedly committed by them after they have believed: 'Lo! Those who believe, then disbelieve, and then (again) believe, then disbelieve and then increase in disbelief, Allah will never pardon them nor will He guide them unto a way' – Sūrat al-Nisā', verse 138. Their increase in disbelief is the natural result of their backsliding and their straying into error after

26 Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid, 'Why Should a Person Who Disbelieves after Becoming a Muslim Be Executed', Islam Questions and Answers, accessed 17 October 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/12406/why-should-a-person-who-disbelieves-after-becoming-muslim-be-executed>.

having received guidance. That is their last opportunity to follow the just and well-defined path.<sup>27</sup>

Again, apostasy is perceived as an attack on the Muslim society. It is also regarded as high treason for which capital punishment is mandatory. Also, an apostate is viewed as a rebel and enemy of the Muslim society in which they happen to live.

Rather paradoxically, the aforementioned arguments are used by scholars to argue that apostasy has nothing to do with high treason and causing disorder, as I will point out in the next section.

### Muslim Scholars Who Object to the Death Penalty for Apostasy

So far I have presented the position of Muslim scholars who are in favour of capital punishment for apostasy in Islam. I will now present the opinion of both classical and modern Muslim scholars who are against the death penalty for apostasy in Islam. The classical scholars Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaī (d. 713) and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778) are of the opinion that the apostate should always be allowed to repent but never executed. However, according to the Muslim scholar ibn Qudāma (d. 1223), who has collected both opinions, this contradicts the Sunnah and the *ijmāʿ*, or consensus of the scholars.<sup>28</sup>

Modern Muslim scholars who object to capital punishment for apostasy put forward several arguments. First, there are more than two hundred verses in the Qurʾān that emphasize freedom of choice, as the modern Muslim scholar Taha Jabir Alalwani (d. 2016) points out,<sup>29</sup> and I present some of these verses below:

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. (2:256)<sup>30</sup>

And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed – all of them entirely. Then, [O Muḥammad], would you compel the people in order that they become believers? (10:99)<sup>31</sup>

27 Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Razzāq Al-Sāmarāʾi, *Aḥkām al-Murtadd fiʾl-Shariʿah al-Islāmīyyah* (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿUlūm li al-Tibaʿa wa al-Nashr, 1983), 182–83. I have used here the English translation by S. A. Rahman in *Punishment of Apostasy in Islam*, 115–16.

28 Ibn Qudāmah, Muwaffaq al-Dīn ʿAbdullah Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisi, *al-Mughni*, 3rd ed. (Riyadh: Dar Alam al-Kutub, 1997), 12:269.

29 Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam*, 130.

30 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/2>, accessed 16 June 2022.

31 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/10>, accessed 16 June 2022.

And you, O Prophet, are not there to compel them to believe. (50:45)<sup>32</sup>

And say, 'the truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve'. (18:29)<sup>33</sup>

Thus, it seems entirely contradictory that, on the one hand, the Qur'ān guarantees freedom of choice, while at the same time it affirms the death penalty for apostasy.

The second argument against capital punishment for apostasy is the earlier mentioned hadith 'whoever changes his religion, kill him'. This hadith is a so-called solitary or *aḥad* narration that became prominent after the early period of Islam and was not known during the time of the Prophet. During the early days of Islam, it was a solitary hadith and incompletely transmitted as well.<sup>34</sup> Also, the chain of narrators (*isnād*) of this hadith contains 'Ikrimah (d. 723), who was the slave of Ibn 'Abbās (d. 687),<sup>35</sup> and at this stage, this hadith received wide circulation. Some Muslims scholars consider 'Ikrimah as reliable, whereas others do not. Thus, the opponents of the death penalty for apostasy consider this hadith weak; therefore, for them, this narration cannot be used as evidence that apostasy merits capital punishment.<sup>36</sup>

The third argument against apostasy that Muslim scholars put forward is that the Prophet never killed anyone for apostasy. Several narrations support this claim, and I shall present some of these narrations below.

A Bedouin gave the Pledge of allegiance to Allah's Apostle for Islam. Then the Bedouin got fever at Medina, came to Allah's Apostle and said, 'O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge,' But Allah's Apostle refused. Then he came to him (again) and said, 'O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge.' But the Prophet refused. Then he came to him (again) and said, 'O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge.' But the Prophet refused. The Bedouin finally went out (of Medina) whereupon Allah's Apostle said, 'Medina is like a pair of bellows (furnace): It expels its impurities and brightens and clears its good.'<sup>37</sup>

32 Dr. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*, <https://quran.com/50>, accessed 16 June 2022.

33 Saheeh International Translation, <https://quran.com/18>, accessed 15 June 2022.

34 Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam*, 67.

35 Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī, *An Introduction to the Science of the Ḥadīth (Kitāb Ma'rifaṭ anwā' 'ilm al-ḥadīth)*, trans. Eerik Dickinson (Reading: Garnet, 2006), no. 6, p. 78. 'Ikrima's full name is Abū 'Abd Allāh 'Ikrima bin 'Abd Allāh al-Barbari al-Madani.

36 Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam*, 78–79.

37 Narrated by al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, 9:93, hadith no. 7211.

This hadith, narrated by al-Bukhāri, points out that the man wanted to leave the fold of Islam, and accordingly, this is a clear case of apostasy. Furthermore, the Prophet did not inflict any punishment on this man, and he left Medina unharmed.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Bukhāri also reports an incident when the Prophet distributed something among his followers: ‘Once the Prophet distributed something (among his followers). A man said, “This distribution has not been done (with justice) seeking Allah’s Countenance.” I went to the Prophet and told him (of that). He became so angry that I saw the signs of anger on his face. Then he said, “May Allah bestow His Mercy on Moses, for he was harmed more (in a worse manner) than this; yet he endured patiently.”’<sup>39</sup>

Accusing the Prophet of injustice, as this man did, amounts to disbelief according to al-Hatem, but the Prophet left him without punishment.<sup>40</sup>

The fourth and final argument against capital punishment is the assumption that apostasy goes hand in hand with hostility or taking up arms against the Muslim community. I have already pointed out above that some Muslim scholars hold that an apostate will sooner or later cause various problems to the Muslim society where they happen to live, such as by demonstrating hostility against the Muslim community or rebellion. Rudolph Peters and Gert de Vries quote two modern Muslim scholars who both point out that apostasy is a public offence:

Muhammad Muḥiy al-Dīn al-Masiri puts it as follows: Apostasy (constitutes) an offense against the social order of Moslem society, for the social order of every Moslem society is Islam. Apostasy means treason to Islam and rebellion against its principles. It causes scepticism as to its truth. No society can function properly if its social order is made object of scepticism and defamation, for that may lead in the end, to the destruction of this order.<sup>41</sup>

Muhammad al-Ghazali, who can be regarded as a representative of a fundamentalist school of thought: Apostasy seldom is a matter that

38 Mohamed Selim El-Awa, *Punishment in Islamic Law* (Plainfield, IN: American Trust, 1981), 54.

39 Narrated by al-Bukhāri, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, 4: 384–85, hadith no. 3405.

40 Al-Haj, Hattem, ‘The Punishment for Apostasy – Can It Be Suspended’, 2016, accessed 16 May 2022, <https://www.amjaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Punishment-for-Apostasy-Dr.-Htem-Elhaj.pdf>, 12.

41 Rudolph Peters and Gert J. T. De Vries, ‘Apostasy in Islam’, *Die Welt des Islams* 17, no. 1 of 4 (1976–77): 1–25 (p. 17).

only concerns one's inner self alone. If that would be the case, nobody would notice it. In most instances apostasy is a psychological pretext for rebellion against worship, traditions and laws, even against the foundations of the state itself and against its stand towards its external enemies. Therefore, apostasy is often synonymous with the crime of high treason.<sup>42</sup>

However, the argument that apostasy is tantamount to high treason, rebellion, or waging war against the Muslim community is, in my opinion, not valid *today* because an apostate can merely change their personal beliefs while still accepting the social order of the Muslim society in which they live. Furthermore, killing an apostate for simply the possibility of taking up arms or demonstrating hostility towards the Muslim community is treating this possibility as an actual fact. In Islamic jurisprudence there must be definitive proof for capital punishment as a divinely prescribed punishment; a mere possibility is not a sufficient cause for such a severe punishment.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the context of today is different from the early period of Islam. Apostates in the early period of Islam were not merely stepping out of Islam but were also joining the enemies of the Muslims. In other words, apostasy was coupled with high treason, and it was legitimate to punish the apostate. Again, nowadays, apostasy in Islam does not automatically amount to taking up arms against the Muslim community.<sup>44</sup>

### Apostasy and the *Hudūd Crimes*

In the Qur'ān there are fixed punishments for certain offences which are called *hudūd* (singular *ḥadd*) punishments. The Arabic word *ḥadd* literally means boundary and refers to an offence that has crossed the boundary of what had been forbidden in the Qur'ān. There is consensus over the following *hudūd* offences: highway robbery (*ḥirābah*) (5:33), theft (*sariqah*) (5:38–9), adultery/fornication (*zina*) (24:2, 5), and slanderous accusation (*qadhf*) (24:4, 5). Some Muslim scholars add drinking alcohol (*shurb al-khamr*), armed

42 Peters and De Vries, 'Apostasy in Islam', 17–18.

43 Alalwani, *Apostasy in Islam*, 101.

44 It can happen that an apostate is socially excluded from the Muslim community. See for example Simon Cottee, *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (London: Hurst, 2015). In this work Cottee describes the lives of ex-Muslims living in the UK and Canada. Some of these apostates are experiencing tough times because they are socially excluded from their Muslim families and friends and have a lonely existence. This situation is not only true for ex-Muslims but for all ex-believers who used to live in a religious community.

rebellion against the legitimate ruler (*baghi*), and apostasy (*riddah*) to the list of *hudūd* crimes because they are mentioned in the Sunnah.<sup>45</sup>

According to the contemporary Muslim scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali, drinking alcohol (*shurb*) and apostasy (*riddah*) are excluded from the *hudūd* because they are not mentioned in the Qur'ān. In other words, Kamali defines *hadd* as a prescribed penalty from the Qur'ān, and since the Qur'ān is silent on the penalty for apostasy and drinking alcohol, these two offences are excluded from the *hudūd* punishments. However, Kamali admits that some Muslim scholars include apostasy among the *hudūd* crimes, for example, some standard works of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), indicating that the Sunnah is a source for the *hudūd* punishments.<sup>46</sup> The implementation of a *hadd* punishment requires rigorous evidence, and in case of doubt, the *hadd* penalties must be prevented, as the following hadith gives the basic ruling:

Avert as far as possible the infliction of prescribed punishments from the Muslims as much as possible, if he has a way out then leave him to his way, for if the Imam (i.e. Judge) makes a mistake in forgiving it, it would be better than making a mistake in punishment.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, once an offence is proved eligible for the *hadd* punishment, the judge should conduct the punishment and repentance will be of no avail. However, as we have previously seen, most Muslim scholars believe that the apostate should be given the opportunity to repent. It is for exactly this same reason that the late and renowned Saudi Muslim scholar al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2001) denies that apostasy is a *hadd* crime. He argues that a *hadd* punishment can never be dropped, even if the offender repents. Yet according to him, this is obviously not the case with apostasy because the apostate should always be given the opportunity to repent. If the apostate repents, al-'Uthaymīn concludes, it is forbidden to execute him.<sup>48</sup>

The late scholar Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni (d. 2017) notes too that there is no consensus among Muslim scholars regarding apostasy being a *hadd*

45 M. Cherif Bassiouni, *The Shari'ah and Islamic Criminal Justice in Time of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 134; Doi, *Shariah: Islamic law*, 221–25; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 191–93; Abū Bakr Jābir al-Jazā'irī, *Minhāj al-Muslim* (Madinah al-Munawwarah: Dār al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥakam, 2000), 705–24.

46 Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction*, 191.

47 Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, 1; 607 hadith no. 1429.

48 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdah al-Saffārīnīyah: al-Durrah al-Mudīyah fi 'Aqd Aḥl al-Firqah al-Marḍīyah* (al-Riyāḍ: Madār al-Waṭan lil-Nashr, 2005/6), 670.

crime.<sup>49</sup> He argues that there is ample evidence that apostasy in itself is not a *ḥadd* crime. According to Bassiouni, what makes apostasy a crime is when it is coupled with warfare or active combat against Islam. In such a case, apostasy becomes equivalent to high treason, which is punishable in almost every legal system. Many legal systems in the world punish high treason with capital punishment.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

With the rise of human rights that warrant freedom of religion, including the right to change one's faith, capital punishment for apostasy in Islam remains a highly controversial and sensitive issue. In Islamic jurisprudence, apostasy is an act of leaving Islam. Hence, there is no specific ruling for converting from Islam to Christianity over against embracing another religion or becoming an atheist. Apostasy in Islam can be approached from different angles. The first approach is the position of the majority of Muslim scholars, which is that capital punishment should be applied for apostasy in Islam. Muslim scholars who take this position base their evidence on solitary narrations of the Prophet, and more importantly, these scholars view apostasy as a political crime. The reason is that, according to these scholars, Islam is not just a religion but a social-political order, and every Muslim is envisaged as a member of this social-political order. An apostate is viewed as someone leaving this social-political order, which is tantamount to high treason. Simultaneously, the apostate is perceived as a person who will sooner or later take up arms against the Muslim society. The second approach, in which apostasy is not considered a crime, is based on the understanding that the Prophet has never ordered an apostate to be killed. In this context, it is argued that the Qur'ān does not specify any temporal punishment for apostasy. In other words, punishment for apostasy has never existed in Islam, let alone the death penalty for it. As long as the apostate does not demonstrate any hostility towards the Muslim community nor cause any harm to its political and social order, apostasy is fully legitimate and does not require capital punishment. At the same time, although many modern Muslim states have embraced human rights such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, it remains to be seen whether someone can openly renounce Islam or whether an apostate can criticize Islam. On a

49 Bassiouni, *The Shari'a and Islamic Criminal Justice*, 134.

50 Bassiouni, *The Shari'a and Islamic Criminal Justice*, 136.

more public level, this question is even more complicated, since in certain populations, religion (both Islam and Christianity) is not only perceived as a personal belief but also as membership of a family or tribe. Changing one's religion is identical to leaving and therefore shaming the tribe. That is problematic.<sup>51</sup>

The present writer concurs with the second approach, that apostasy in itself should not be considered a crime. Furthermore, there are more than two hundred verses in the Qur'ān that emphasize freedom of religion and choice, making it impossible to punish an apostate who has exercised both freedoms.

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51 See Ermers and Barentsen, Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, of this volume.





# 13 Exclusionary Texts in ‘A Common Word’

*Gé Speelman*

## Abstract

The open letter sent by prominent Muslim leaders to the Pope and the Christian community contains many references to texts from the Qur’ān and the Bible. Some of these texts can be interpreted as exclusionary texts vis-à-vis religious others. This contribution describes the ways in which the authors of *A Common Word* opt for alternative interpretations of a number of such texts, opening up possibilities for a more inclusionary understanding of both the Qur’ānic and Biblical approaches toward religious others.

**Keywords:** saming, othering, exclusivism, inclusivism, tafsir, exegesis

## Introduction

In October 2007 an open letter entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* was sent by 138 Muslim scholars to 27 Christian Church leaders. The sending of this letter was part of a carefully planned media event. The letter was published on the Internet<sup>1</sup> as were the subsequent reactions by church leaders and others.<sup>2</sup> This implies that the aim was not merely to communicate with church leaders but with a wider public of Christians, Muslims, and possibly others. In the ensuing process, many representatives

1 ‘A Common Word’, A Common Word, accessed 4 October 2022, [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com).

2 For the background of this open letter, which was a sequel to an open letter to Pope Benedict in 2006, see ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed 3 June 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Common\\_Word\\_Between\\_Us\\_and\\_You](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Common_Word_Between_Us_and_You). For the letter, see ‘ACW Document’, accessed 3 June 2021, [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com), and for reactions to the letter from the Christian side see ‘Responses’, A Common Word, accessed 3 June 2021, <https://www.acommonword.com/christian-responses/>. Bernhard Reitsma wrote an overview of the evangelical responses for the Dutch public: Bernhard J. G. Reitsma, ‘Een open brief aan christenen. Een verrassende uitnodiging van toonaangevende moslims?’, *Soteria* 1 (2009), 38–43.

of Christian religious communities, theologians, and lay persons responded to the letter, and a number of conferences and forums were organized around *A Common Word*.<sup>3</sup>

The appeal to Christians to enter into dialogue with Muslims in *A Common Word* is supported by a theological argumentation that uses texts from the Qur'ān, Hadith, and the Bible. The summary at the beginning of the letter encapsulates the line of the argumentation:

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. *The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.*<sup>4</sup>

The authors of *A Common Word* (hereafter *ACW*) stress the common ground between Biblical and Qur'ānic texts and tend to play down the apparent differences in these texts. Thus, they claim, using as their starting point Jesus's double commandment (love of God and of the neighbour) as a frame, that the core message of the Qur'ān and Hadith is not essentially different from the Christian core message. They hope to set up conversations and forms of cooperation between Muslims and Christians worldwide on the basis of the structural similarities between their sacred Scriptures.

In calling for dialogue, the authors make little appeal<sup>5</sup> to political, general ethical, or social arguments but instead make considerable use of scriptural, textual reasoning. The letter distinguishes itself by a meticulous use of texts from the Holy Scriptures of Islam and Christianity, in the apparent conviction that this common ground can be found precisely there. The

3 See also: Miroslav Volf, Ghazi Bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington, eds., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

4 'ACW Document', *A Common Word*, accessed 3 June 2021, <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>, 2. Italics mine.

5 An exception is the opening and closing paragraphs of the letter. The opening paragraph has been quoted above. In the closing passage, the writers again refer to the threat to world peace by the strained relations between Christians and Muslims: 'If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace' (*ACW*, 15).

question whether this is so, and whether the authors are therefore right in their argumentation, is an important one in a number of the responses from the Christian side.<sup>6</sup>

In this contribution I would like to address another question: How do the authors of *ACW* reflect on exclusionary texts from Holy Scripture, both their own and those of the religious other? Exclusionary texts are common, both in the Bible and in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> In both Scriptures there are many texts distinguishing good people from evil people, and groups of faithful believers from groups of unbelievers. The former are walking with God, whereas the latter are excluded from the community of the faithful. In this sense many sacred texts offer the opportunity to exclude contemporaries or fellow citizens from the ingroup. The presence of such texts is not surprising. It is the use of each text, their interpretations in the present context, that is of importance. An exclusivist reading of such texts may lead to mechanisms of *othering*, while a more inclusivist interpretation may lead to a process of *saming*. The terminology of 'othering' and 'saming' is explained later in this contribution. To answer my question, I will address one part of this comprehensive document, namely the third section of *ACW* in which several exclusionary texts are explicitly discussed. First, I will briefly outline the content of the substantive argument of the letter.

## The structure of A Common Word

*ACW* is structured like a letter. Of the twenty-nine pages of the English PDF text, eleven are dedicated to the addressees (page 1) and senders (pages 20–29) of the letter. The main body of the letter (pages 2–19) contains an ongoing argumentation with endnotes, which is divided into three parts. The first part has as its title 'love of God' (pages 4–10); the second, much shorter part has the theme 'love of neighbour' (pages 11, 12). The third part is entitled 'Come to a common word between us and you' (pages 13–16).

6 One instance is the reaction by the World Evangelical Alliance: 'We too would want to live in Peace, Freedom and Justice', April 2008, [http://www.worldevangelicals.org/We\\_Too\\_Want\\_to\\_Live\\_in\\_Love\\_Peace\\_Freedom\\_and\\_Justice.pdf](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/We_Too_Want_to_Live_in_Love_Peace_Freedom_and_Justice.pdf). The authors of this document argue that *ACW* is in fact an appeal to Christians to convert to Islam, since there is no resemblance between the Qur'anic texts about the Unity of God and the biblical texts about the Trinity, hence no common ground between these sacred texts. Cf Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue. A Study of Texts from the Common Word Dialogue Process* (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018), 111–25.

7 For the categories 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism', and 'pluralism', I refer to the introduction (Chapter 1) in this volume by Bernhard Reitsma.

In the first, most extensive part, texts from the Qur'ān and Hadith are quoted, admonishing the believers to confess the unity of God (*tawhid*). The one, unique God requires the total dedication of the believer. Total dedication means, so the argument continues, that people need to be totally devoted to God with their minds, their wills, and their feelings.<sup>8</sup> On pages 8–10, the Islamic texts under scrutiny are compared with the statement of Jesus in Matthew 22:37 and Mark 12:30 and the statement of the scribe in Luke 10:27. All three Gospel quotations speak of the love of God with the heart, the soul, and the mind (taken to be more or less equivalent with devotion of the mind, will, and feeling that can be derived from Qur'ānic texts). The differences between the wordings and context of the three Gospel texts are clarified for the non-Christian reader. The authors conclude their discussion of Qur'ānic and biblical texts asserting that there is an 'effective similarity' in the meaning of the Qur'ānic texts on *tawhid* and the biblical texts on love for God, the One. It is obvious that the choice and arrangement of the Qur'ānic texts takes the Gospel texts as its departing point and as the framework for their textual interpretations. In other words, if the formulation in the Gospels 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind' (Matt. 22:37) had not existed, the framework for this combination of texts from the Qur'ān and Hadith in *ACW* (texts speaking of devotion for God with all the human faculties) would not have been arranged in this way.<sup>9</sup>

The second part of the letter, which deals with love for the neighbour, is much shorter and takes up about one page. Here the starting point is a hadith<sup>10</sup> from the *Sahih* of Bukhari (with variations from Muslim): 'None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.'<sup>11</sup> This hadith is supported by two Qur'ānic verses.<sup>12</sup> The authors then compare these Islamic texts with Matthew 22: 38–40/Mark 12:31, making the observation that in calling for love of the neighbour, Jesus is quoting from Leviticus 19:17 and 18.<sup>13</sup>

In the third part of the letter, an appeal is made to Christians to enter into dialogue with Muslims, as already formulated on the first page of the letter. In conformity with the discourse of the letter, this appeal is supported using scriptural reasoning: the quotation of and exegetical analysis of texts from

8 *ACW*, 7

9 See Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, 16.

10 A hadith is a saying of the Prophet Muḥammad.

11 *ACW*, 7.

12 Sūra 2:177 and sūra 3:92.

13 *ACW*, 10, 11.

sacred scripture. The conditions and possibilities for dialogue are reflected in a number of texts from the Qur'ān and the Bible. The outcome of this process is that a common ground for inclusion of the religious other is found in the Qur'ān and the Bible. The texts employed in this section form part of a body of texts that in the past have often given rise to the construction of insurmountable differences with the religious other.<sup>14</sup>

### Sameness or Difference?

In many dialogue documents, the similarities between religions are the starting point for the conversation. Vebjørn Horsfjord writes that such an assumption is part of a performative speech act. By saying that the commonalities between religious communities are larger than their differences and that their own religious traditions have included an openness for other believers, such dialogue documents are trying to create a certain discourse which runs counter to other discourses about interreligious relations where the deep and insurmountable differences between religions are a barrier to real understanding.<sup>15</sup> The tactic of emphasizing a common ground for encounter is often linked to an inclusivist view, in which one tries to include the religious other in the normative framework of one's own religion, or to a pluralist view, in which religious differences are transcended by a normative meta-perspective.<sup>16</sup> The authors of *ACW* try to make plausible the common ground between Islam and Christianity through their analysis of scriptural texts.

In the analysis of the speech acts within *ACW*, two notions are particularly useful: *othering* and *saming*. Gayatri Spivak coined the term 'othering', which subsequently came into force in postcolonial studies.<sup>17</sup> In the context of postcolonial theory, *othering* is presented as a product of imperialism. It is not the same as differentiation, which is a very natural way of behaving in which people in social contexts frame the differences they perceive between

14 See for sūra 60:1–9, Fatemeh Layeghi, Abbas Hemami, and Mohammad Reza Aram, 'Guardianship Prevention Strategies of the Believers from the Infidels Based on the Structural Interpretation of Surah Al-Mumtahana', *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 8, no. 8 (August 2021): 378–89.

15 Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, 8.

16 See Chapter 1 of this volume by Bernhard Reitsma for an elaboration of the meaning of the terms inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism.

17 Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985), 247–72.

self and others, or between their own groups or religious community and those of others. It is not particularly useful to use the term ‘othering’ in every situation where differences between groups are perceived and expressed. It can be meaningfully used, however, in situations where others who are in a subaltern position are represented by dominant groups in ways they cannot easily challenge. The other is perceived as inferior and also as unchanging. It is a freezing of differences.<sup>18</sup> As problematic as *othering* is the process of *saming*.<sup>19</sup> Seen superficially, *saming* seems to be the exact opposite of *othering*. But in fact, both the processes of *saming* and *othering* are closely related. Here again, the other is not allowed to speak for themselves but is frozen into a position of likeness. *Saming* happens in processes of interreligious dialogue when the similarities between two religious traditions are assumed by the dominant voices in the debate without entering into a complicated process of dynamic negotiations in which both parties are allowed to have an equal voice.<sup>20</sup> An example is the use of the term ‘Jewish-Christian tradition’. This term assumes a sameness between these traditions that belies a complex history of conviviality and hostility in which the Jewish community was mostly not allowed to speak for itself and was subjected to the judgements of the dominant groups in society.<sup>21</sup>

In almost all religious traditions, there are texts that make a binary distinction between good and evil, between people who serve God correctly and others who stray from the right path. Such religious texts can be used to reinforce the process of *othering*. If such texts are interpreted by a dominant group within the religious community, they can be read as absolute statements about an immutable group of religious outsiders – outsiders who then become the unchanging ‘others’. However, the same texts, read in an inclusive way, can also offer openings for encounter and negotiation with the religious other. Then the same texts can show the readers that both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are dynamic categories and that they do not belong to a priori fixed and immutable identities. With their exegesis, the writers of *ACW* are attempting to come to grips with both biblical and Qur’ānic

18 Oscar Thomas Olalde and Astride Velho, ‘Othering and Its Effects – Exploring the Concept’, in *Writing Postcolonial Histories of Intercultural Education*, ed. Heike Niedrig and Christian Ydesen (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 27–50 (p. 30).

19 Naomi Schor used this term for the first time. Naomi Schor, ‘This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray’, *Differences* 1 (1989): 38–58.

20 Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, 10.

21 Dirk-Martin Grube, ‘Respecting Religious Otherness as Otherness Versus Exclusivism and Religious Pluralism’, in *Religious Truth and Identity in an Age of Plurality*, ed. Peter Jonkers and Oliver J. Wiertz (London: Routledge, 2020), 182–199.

texts that have played a role in the exclusion of religious others and offer instead a more inclusive and dynamic explanation of such texts.

How does the third part of *ACW* deal with the exclusionary texts it quotes? To answer this question, I will look in more detail at two quotes from the Qur'ān in *ACW* and then at the way it handles two texts from the Gospels.

### The Interpretation of Sūra 3:64

Building on this assumption of common ground, the authors cite from the Qur'ān to argue that people of the Scripture should come to a common word. This is supported by the quotation of sūra 3:64:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Āl 'Imran 3:64)

This is potentially an exclusionary text and has often been explained as such in the Islamic tradition (*tafsīr*).<sup>22</sup> In such *tafsīrs*, the admonition to come to a 'common word' (*kalima sawā'in*) assumes that the Jewish and Christian contemporaries of Muḥammad did, in fact, ascribe a partner to God (the Christians) or that they took others for lords besides God (the Christians and the Jews). So, the turning away of Muḥammad's conversation partners in sūra 3:64 apparently is the expected outcome of the conversation. The 'we' in the clause 'We are they who have surrendered' consists, according to the traditional exegesis of this passage, of the group of Muḥammad's followers; they are the true worshippers who have surrendered (*aslama*) to God and are therefore 'muslims'.<sup>23</sup> The writers of 'A Common Word' give a slightly different interpretation to this potentially exclusionary text, however. They

22 The verse is, according to most commentators, alluding to the visit of a delegation of Christians to Muḥammad. For example, Ibn al Khatīr writes in his *tafsīr* about the passage of sūra 9:59–64: 'The reason for the call to Mubalah and the revelation of the Ayat from the beginning of this Surah until here, is that a delegation from the Christians of Najran (in Yemen) came to Al-Madinah to argue about 'Isa, claiming that he was divine and the son of Allah. Allah sent down the beginning of this Surah until here, to refute their claims, as Imam Muhammad bin Ishaq bin Yasar and other scholars stated.' 'Commentaries for 3.64', The Quran, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://quranx.com/tafsirs/3.64>.

23 *Muslim* is the participle derived from the infinitive of the verb *aslama*, to surrender.



connect the clause ‘that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him’ to the observations they made in the first part of the letter, where they discussed the structural resemblances between the Qur’ānic teachings about *tawhid*, the unity of God in the Qur’ān, and the Great Commandment. In other words, they reinforce their argument that the Gospel is indeed in agreement with the text of sūra 3:64 when it comes to total devotion of the one and only God. In the approach of the writers of *ACW*, sūra 3:64 should not be read as a text that excludes all Christians of all times from the community of believers that confess to the unity of God.

For the second injunction, ‘that none of us shall take others for lords beside God’, they follow the exegesis of one of the most revered classical *mufassirūn* (commentators), Abu Ja’far Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari (d. 310 H / 923 CE). In his *tafsīr*, Tabari says that the latter part of the text ‘none of us shall take others for lords beside God’ should be read as an injunction ‘that none of us should obey in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God’. This quote from Tabari is interpreted by the writers of *ACW* as an appeal for believers to follow the dictates of their own conscience instead of submitting to coercion from religious authority. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, they write, ‘should be free to each follow what God commands them’ and not have ‘to prostrate before kings and the like’. Political pressure to accommodate the majority belief in a society is out of the question, because that would mean a submission before ‘Kings and the like’ instead of an assent out of free will to serve God and God alone. To reinforce the implication that this part of 3:64 is dealing with freedom of conscience, the writers of *ACW* make a connection with a Qur’ānic quotation from sūra 2:256: ‘There is no compulsion in religion.’<sup>24</sup> And they in turn link this quotation to the second biblical commandment ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. The implicit reasoning that underlies this arrangement of texts is that *justice* and *love of the neighbour* are closely connected and that freedom of religion is an important component of justice. The beginning of the verse ‘Come to a common word between us and you’ can be interpreted, as indeed Tabari does, to ‘come to a *just* (*ādil*) word between us and you’, making the verse into a call by God to cooperate for the sake of justice.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a traditionally more common exclusionary interpretation of sūra 3:64 is transformed into a plea for freedom of religion.

After the appearance of the text, some Christian commentators of *ACW* point out that in a later passage in his *Tafsir*, Tabari interprets sūra 3:64 as

24 In Arabic: *lā Ikrāha fi dīn*; the word ‘*dīn*’ denotes custom, judgement, religion.

25 Footnote 22 of *ACW*, 21.

part of a polemic against Christians.<sup>26</sup> Such an interpretation is possible in the light of the preceding verses, sūra 3:59–63. Here the text of the Qur'ān presents an alternative to the prevailing Christian view that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>27</sup> Most *mufasssīrūn*, taking the Qur'ānic passage to be rooted in a debate between Muḥammad and a delegation of Christians from Najran, interpret sūra 3:64 in the context of a critical debate with Christians about their erroneous beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, a verse from the Qur'ān in which, according to the prevailing interpretation, the Christian contemporaries of Muḥammad are seen as distinct from the community of true believers is interpreted by the authors of *ACW* in a new and in some respects surprising way as a plea for religious freedom.

The verse clearly indicates that some people cannot come to a common word with the followers of Muḥammad. Those who worship powers other than God, those who ascribe partners to God, and those who take others for lords beside God cannot form part of the community of believers. In that way the wording of sūra 3:64 creates a separation between believers and unbelievers. Like many other texts in Holy Scripture, the text excludes some while including others. This exclusionary tendency in sūra 3:64 is not contested by the writers of *ACW*. Rather, they take into consideration

26 Lutz Richter-Bernburg, *A Common Word Between Us and You: Observations On the (Mis) use of Koranic Exegesis in Interreligious Dialogue (online)* (Tübingen: University of Tübingen, 2008). Compare with Qurratu A'yn, Lukita Fahriana, Kusmana Kusmana, Eva Nugraha, and Lilik Ummi Kultsum, 'Interpretation of Surah Ali Imrān Verse 64 about Kalimatun Sawā: An Analysis Study of Ma'ana-cum-Maghza', *Proceedings of the 3rd International Colloquium on Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies, October 20–21, 2020, Jakarta, Indonesia*, <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.20-10-2020.2305165>.

27 The text of the whole passage of sūra 6:9–64 reads as follows: 'The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be." And he was. The Truth (comes) from Allah alone; so be not of those who doubt. If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge Hath come to thee, say: "Come! let us gather together, – our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie!" This is the true account: There is no god except Allah; and Allah-He is indeed the Exalted in Power, the Wise. But if they turn back, Allah hath full knowledge of those who do mischief. Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will).'" Translation by Yusuf Ali, 'Commentaries for 3.64', *The Quran*, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://quranx.com/3.64>.

28 This is the case with the *tafsīr* of Abbas, the Jalalayn, Kashani, the abovementioned Ibn al-Khatir, and Wahīdi. Only Mawdudi reads verse 64 in a different way: he thinks it reflects on a conversation of Muḥammad with the Jews of Medina. 'Commentaries for 3.64', *The Quran*, accessed 15 October 2021, <https://quranx.com/Tafsirs/3.61>.

that these categories of unbelievers do not completely coincide with the Christian community. Jesus himself gives a strong reminder of the underlying monotheism in the Gospel when he connects the two commandments with the Shema in Mark 12:29–31. Christians are ‘reminded’ of the words of Jesus in Mark 12: 29–31: ‘... the LORD our God, the LORD is one. / And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’<sup>29</sup>

If Christians are true followers of Christ, they should pay heed to his words. And in that case, if Christians are truly living by the Gospel, *sūra* 3:64 could not be directed against Christians.

This procedure is also followed with another text they quote in this part of the letter, from *sūra* 60:8:

God forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers.

This text opens up possibilities for Muslim believers to have amicable contacts with religious others. It also formulates the conditions under which such peaceful encounters are possible.<sup>30</sup> The religious others in question

29 ACW, 14.

30 The whole passage from which the text is taken, *sūra* 60:1–9, reads as follows: ‘O ye who believe! Take not my enemies and yours as friends (or protectors), – offering them (your) love, even though they have rejected the Truth that has come to you, and have (on the contrary) driven out the Prophet and yourselves (from your homes), (simply) because ye believe in Allah your Lord! If ye have come out to strive in My Way and to seek My Good Pleasure, (take them not as friends), holding secret converse of love (and friendship) with them: for I know full well all that ye conceal and all that ye reveal. And any of you that does this has strayed from the Straight Path. If they were to get the better of you, they would behave to you as enemies, and stretch forth their hands and their tongues against you for evil: and they desire that ye should reject the Truth. Of no profit to you will be your relatives and your children on the Day of Judgement: He will judge between you: for Allah sees well all that ye do. There is for you an excellent example (to follow) in Abraham and those with him, when they said to their people: “We are clear of you and of whatever ye worship besides Allah: we have rejected you, and there has arisen, between us and you, enmity and hatred for ever, – unless ye believe in Allah and Him alone”: But not when Abraham said to his father: “I will pray for forgiveness for thee, though I have no power (to get) aught on thy behalf from Allah.” (They prayed): “Our Lord! in Thee do we trust, and to Thee do we turn in repentance: to Thee is (our) Final Goal. Our Lord! Make us not a (test and) trial for the Unbelievers, but forgive us, our Lord! for Thou art the Exalted in Might, the Wise.” There was indeed in them an excellent example for you to follow, – for those whose hope is in Allah and in the Last Day. But if any turn away, truly Allah is Free of all Wants, Worthy of all Praise. It may be that Allah will grant love (and friendship) between you and those whom ye (now) hold as enemies. For Allah has power (over all things); And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most

should not be hostile to Muslims on account of their faith. If these conditions are met, then Muslims should be kindly inclined to religious others and observe justice. Inclusivity is not interpreted here (in the Qur'anic text and in the way it is put in this place in the document) as an unconditional acceptance of the other, an 'anything goes', but rather as a potentiality for openness. The intended audience of the text of sūra 60:8 is the Muslim community. The writers of *ACW*, however, shift the focus to the audience they address in the letter, their Christian conversation partners, and they stress the opening the text offers for peaceful encounter.

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an [Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8] quoted above).<sup>31</sup>

### **The Interpretation of Mark 9:40, Matthew 12:30, and Luke 11:23**

In their scriptural approach, the authors of *ACW* also pay attention to possibly exclusionary texts from the New Testament. They quote from three passages from the Gospels and discuss these texts.

Is Christianity necessarily against Muslims? In the Gospel Jesus Christ says:

*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:30)*

*For he who is not against us is on our side. (Mark 9:40)*

*...for he who is not against us is on our side. (Luke 9:50).<sup>32</sup>*

Thus, the writers of *ACW* put in juxtaposition one possibly exclusionary text (Matt. 12:30) and two possibly inclusionary texts (Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50). How should the messages of these texts be combined? Are the Gospels in

Merciful. Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just. Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong.' Translation by Yusuf Ali, 'Commentaries for 3.64', The Quran, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://quranx.com/3.64>.

<sup>31</sup> *ACW*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> *ACW*, 15. Italics original.

contradiction with each other? An important part of the age-old polemics between Muslims and Christians is the accusation that Christians have falsified or at least made a selection in their scriptures (*tahrīf*).<sup>33</sup> Internal contradictions between Gospel texts is an argument that plays a major role in these polemics. The authors of *ACW* do not refer to this background in their analysis. Rather, they assume that there must be an underlying reason for the apparent contradiction and try to clarify it. While they read sūra 3:64 through the (partial) interpretation of Tabari, in this part of their letter, the writers make use of the Christian commentator Theophylact of Ohrid (1055–1107).<sup>34</sup> This commentary is very popular in Eastern Orthodox churches. Theophylact reasons that there is no contradiction between the three gospel texts. They only address different contexts. In the brief wording of *ACW*, ‘the first statement (in the actual Greek text of the New Testament) refers to demons, whereas the second and third statements refer to people who recognised Jesus, but were not Christians.’<sup>35</sup>

The argument of Theophylact goes as follows. In Matthew 12 Jesus is in discussion with the Pharisees who accuse Jesus of using the power of Satan to drive out demons. Jesus’s answer is to refer to the demons themselves (they are not for Jesus, therefore are against him) as well as to the Pharisees (they are the ones who scatter abroad, and who sin against the Holy Spirit by assigning Jesus to the realm of Satan). The text excludes not only demons and Satan but also those who emphatically deny the divine power of Jesus. In Mark and Luke, on the other hand, Jesus is in conversation with his disciples, who are troubled because another person has driven out demons in the name of Jesus but refuses to join their company. In these texts there is an inclusion of outsiders, but under certain conditions. Those outsiders are speaking in the name of Jesus, and that means that they do not deny His divine powers but align themselves with them, without becoming fully-fledged members of his movement. The authors of *ACW* read the texts from the perspective that Mark and Luke are connecting these benevolent outsiders with Muslims. Like the healers in Mark and Luke, Muslims to some extent acknowledge the divine powers of Jesus without becoming part of the Christian community. In this manner, an inclusionary text from the Gospels is interpreted as also potentially including Muslims. They write,

33 For the accusation of *tahrīf*, see R. Michael McCoy, *Interpreting the Qur’ān with the Bible (Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi-l-Kitāb)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 30–34.

34 Christopher Stade, trans., *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to Mark by Blessed Theophylact Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria*, 5th ed. (House Springs, MO: Chrysostom Press, 1992), 79.

35 *ACW*, 15.

Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do (but Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ's nature), but in the following way: ...the Messiah Jesus son of Mary is a Messenger of God and His Word which he cast unto Mary and a Spirit from Him... (Al-Nisa', 4:171). We therefore invite Christians to consider Muslims not against and thus with them, in accordance with Jesus Christ's words here.<sup>36</sup>

Here the writers of *ACW*, in a complicated move, open up the inclusion of Muslims in the group of people who are 'not against and thus with' Christians, at the same time affirming the enduring differences between Muslims and Christians when it comes to the nature of Christ. A remarkable feature of this passage is that so far, both the terms 'Muslims' and 'Christians' seem to refer throughout the document to stable and unified entities. Nowhere are there signs of a recognition of the diversity and lack of consensus on some issues within both communities. But in this passage there is a reference to Christian internal diversity. This diversity may create a space for Muslims, who generally do not acknowledge the divine nature of Christ, to discover the possibility to include unspecified groups within the Christian communities within their religious ingroup. It also opens up the possibility that among Christians, there may be a movement of convergence with the Muslim viewpoint on the divine nature of Christ. The religious other is seen as someone who resembles the people who are on the same side of the dividing line.

## Conclusion

The call for dialogue lies at the heart of *ACW*. This call can be interpreted as an attempt to break with a rhetoric of *othering* that is part of the encounter between Muslim and Christian communities worldwide. In *othering*, the religious other is read and interpreted as irrevocably different and unchangeable, without being able to answer for themselves. Religious texts play an important role in this process of *othering* because they often speak of a binary division between good and evil, between the saved and the sinners, or between 'us' and the outsiders. The authors of *ACW* attempt to mediate between the prevailing interpretation of religious orthodoxy within the Muslim community and a more inclusive way of interpreting texts. They do so when they conclude that sūra 3:64 gives the possibility of including Christians in the community that

<sup>36</sup> *ACW*, 15.

comes to a common word with the Prophet Muḥammad. They extend the intentions of sūra 3:64 by reading it as an injunction to strive for freedom of religion worldwide. Inclusivity does not mean that anything goes, however. The Qur'ānic text of sūra 60:80 excludes certain people, like those who go against the injunction of religious freedom by persecuting Muslims for their faith. In its condemnation of religiously intolerant people, sūra 60:80 reinforces the interpretation the writers of *ACW* give of sūra 3:64.

The text of Matthew 12 would have given the authors of *ACW* a possibility for excluding the religiously intolerant people in the time of Jesus, who accused Jesus of having ties with Satan. They forgo this opportunity to concentrate on the two inclusive texts of Mark 9 and Luke 9. They suggest that Muslims could be read to be in the category of religious others who are included by Jesus. Although they do not say so, they seem to suggest that the Muslim claim that Jesus is a prophet would fall within the boundaries of what a Christian could say or think.

In their eagerness to be more inclusivistic, the writers of *ACW* run the risk of reverting to the tactics of *saming*. It has often been remarked by critics of Christian inclusivistic theologies that they run the risk of creating an image of the religious other that makes the other fit into the categories of one's own religion.<sup>37</sup> This is happening when inclusivism of the writers of *ACW* threatens to become a process of *saming* in which the religious other is not allowed to speak for themselves.

Although at first sight both the Christian and Muslim traditions of interpretation are presented in *ACW* as static and indivisible, the authors in fact present innovative interpretations on the century-old texts. In this way, they contribute to the dynamics and diversity within and between the reading communities of the Qur'ān and the Bible, Sacred Scriptures which they present as questioning each other in a give-and-take between exclusion and inclusion.

## About the author

**Gé Speelman** is an emeritus assistant professor at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht. She also worked in the Islam office of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and was a parish priest in that church.

37 One of the thinkers at the basis of many inclusivistic theologies, Karl Rahner, who claimed that sincere religious others could be 'anonymous Christians', was criticized on similar grounds. The term 'anonymous Christian' implies that the religious other is spun into the categories of Christianity.

# 14 Canaan and the New World: Native Americans Engage the Legacy of Exclusionary Readings

*Eleonora Hof*

## Abstract

Contemporary Native Americans have to grapple with the exclusionary reading of the Hebrew Bible that aided the genocide against their ancestors. This contribution traces the roots of the identification of Native Americans with Canaan and outlines responses from contemporary native theologians and authors. Three areas of focus are suggested for a constructive engagement with this topic: to practise lament, to deconstruct church teachings on this topic, and to change our mission practices towards a decolonial praxis of mission. I conclude that it is necessary for contemporary readers to strongly distance themselves from violent readings that legitimize conquest in order to arrive at a truly decolonial reading of exclusionary texts.

**Keywords:** postcolonial theology, missiology, hermeneutics, indigenous theology, Deuteronomy

## Introduction

The colonization of the Americas and the genocide of the native inhabitants of the land can be characterized as a theological event: a fusion of theological and secular ideas played an important role in providing the rationale for colonization by both Anglican and Puritan settlers in the 'New World'. One of the most influential images that played a role was the identification of the native inhabitants of the land with the Canaanites. This comparison was actively constructed and did not arise 'naturally', since many advocates



of colonization knew full well the prevalence of biblical texts that stressed the love of their neighbours.

This contribution first and foremost explores how the religious history of Israel became fused with the history of the colonial settlers. The first part therefore has a predominantly historical character: it traces the hermeneutical decisions that were made to fuse the narrative of Canaan with the narrative of the Native Americans, the original inhabitants of what is currently North America. Even though the genocide wiped out a significant portion of the native population, the legacy of the various First Nations<sup>1</sup> is kept alive to this present day. First Nations Christians must contend with a thorny and painful legacy. In the second part, I trace contemporary responses to settler colonialism by First Nations theologians. How do they deal with this legacy and how do they read exclusive texts in the Hebrew Bible? The third part of this contribution gathers these threads together and formulates a contextual approach for Christians in the Western world, since we need to come to terms with our legacy. I employ a postcolonial reading to explore the question of how our church practices might be informed by Native American readings.

## Canaan and the New World

An anonymous tract was discovered in the legacy of Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618). This tract denied any similarity between Israel's conquest and the English settlers of the 'New World' because 'God has given no Christians any such warrant.... Christians are commanded to do good to all men, and to have peace with all men.'<sup>2</sup> For Christians who grew up listening to the Ten Commandments with the explicit prohibition of murder and who heard in church the Great Commandment with the similarly explicit admonition of Christ to love one's neighbour, it was absolutely not self-evident to make the gargantuan leap to assert that Christians had the moral right to claim North America as their own land and to wipe out the original inhabitants in the process. This quote from the anonymous tract shows that many were aware that

1 In this contribution I use terminology that is preferred by First Nations people themselves, such as indigenous, American-Indian, and First Nations. This latter term has a strong ideological value since First Nations Peoples distinguish themselves in this way from the descendants of settler-colonialism by emphasizing that they are the original inhabitants of the land.

2 Cited by Alfred A. Cave, 'Canaanites in a Promised Land: The American Indian and the Providential Theory of Empire', *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1988): 277–97 (pp. 280–81). I have modernized the spelling.

one could not so easily jump from the biblical texts commanding love for one's neighbour to conquest or to rejoice in the perishing of the native population.

Which arguments were used, then, to side-track the weight of the theological tradition, which promoted peace and prohibited murder, in order to arrive at a justification for conquest? In other words, which hermeneutical strategies were employed to read the Bible as a legitimization of conquest? In my survey of the literature, I have found various hermeneutical manoeuvres: Firstly, the fusion of the settlers with Israel and the native inhabitants with Canaan. Secondly, a particular idea of providence. Thirdly, the literal demonization of First Nations as devil-worshippers who either needed to be wiped out or converted to Christianity. And lastly, the secular idea of the *vacuum domicilium*, which held that empty lands could be seized freely.

### **Canaanites as the Other**

The biblical narrative provided the settlers with a readily available template in which the archetype of Israel as the chosen people and the Canaanites as the subjugated pagans could be re-enacted anew.<sup>3</sup> The Canaanites function as a narrative device for the 'other', the impure, the heathen, all that needs to be purged from the land.<sup>4</sup> The scheme on which the identification of the Native Americans and the Canaanites rests is very simple: there is an ingroup, the favourites and the chosen ones – namely, Israel in the Hebrew Bible – and the new inhabitants of the land during the conquest of the Americas. And diametrically opposed are the original inhabitants: as lawless pagans, they inhabit the land, much like the Canaanites during the time of Israel's conquest. According to Jonathan Edwards, for example, there are three main enemies: the Catholics, Muslims, and the 'heathen'. For him the Canaanites function as the quintessential heathen.<sup>5</sup>

### **Providence**

One additional idea is needed to explain the fusion of the Native land with Canaan: the idea of providence; that it was God's will and benefaction to provide this land to the settlers. This idea of providence clearly shows up in

3 Sylvester A. Johnson, 'New Israel, New Canaan: The Bible, the People of God, and the American Holocaust', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1–2 (2005): 25–39 (pp. 33–37).

4 Robert Allen Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians', in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 277–85 (pp. 281–83).

5 Johnson, 'New Israel, New Canaan', 34.

the literature of the time. In 1613 Reverend Alexander Whitaker, who was a pastor in Virginia, wrote, ‘God first showed us the place, God first called us hither, and here God by his special providence hath maintained us.’<sup>6</sup> This idea of providence is quite circular: the providence exists by virtue of settling in Virginia; the mere fact of settlement is providential.

An extremely sinister idea of providence was propagated by King James I (1566–1625)<sup>7</sup>, who wrote that ‘within these late years there hath visitation rained a Wonderful Plague ... to the utter Destruction, Devastation and Depopulation of the whole Territorie’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the fact that Native Americans, who had not built immunity to diseases brought by the settlers, were perishing in large numbers was part and parcel of a divine plan.

Another element of the divine providence theory was propagated by an Anglican minister Robert Gray in a tract that was widely read. This tract used Joshua 17:14<sup>9</sup> as a cornerstone to argue that the inhabitants of England were similarly confined to a ‘narrow land’ and needed the new land in the New World. King James I, the ‘most religious and renowned King’, is cast as a modern-day Joshua, and is literally called ‘our Joshua’. Reading these texts from the perspective of the twenty-first century is chilling and astonishing: the link between Joshua’s conquest of Canaan and the settlers in Virginia is as explicit as it could possibly get.<sup>10</sup>

## Idolatry

Thirdly, the Native Americans were cast as worshippers of the devil, and their idolatry provided grounds for their ultimate demise. I have not been

6 Cave, *Canaanites in a Promised Land*, 288.

7 King James was James VI of Scotland and, after the death of Elizabeth I, also acceded to the throne of England as the first Stuart king, where he was subsequently known as King James I.

8 Cave, *Canaanites in a Promised Land*, 291.

9 ‘The tribe of Joseph spoke to Joshua, saying, “Why have you given me but one lot and one portion as an inheritance, since we are a numerous people, whom all along the LORD has blessed?”’ (NRSV).

10 ‘I thought good to handle this conference betwéene the tribe of Ioseph a family in the Israel of God, & Ioshua a faithfull and godly Prince ouer the whole commonwealth of Gods Israel: which to my séeming, is much like that plot which we haue now in hand for Virginia; for here the people of Ephraim and of the halfe tribe of Manasses, are a great people, and so are we: and by reason of the multitude of their people, the land is too narrow for them; and so stands our case, whereupon they repaire to to haue his warrant and direction to enlarge their oers, and so haue many of our Noble men of honorable minds, worthy knights, rich marchants, & diuerse other of the best dispositiō, solicited our Ioshua, and mightie Monarch, that most religious & renowned King James, that by his Maiesties leaue, they might vndertake the plantation of Virginia.’ Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia*, 1609, accessed 18 October 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A02059.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

able to find a primary source that explicitly uses Deuteronomy 17 and its condemnation of apostasy as a justification for conquest.<sup>11</sup>

The claim that Indians were devil worshippers goes back to the conviction that Indians are (metaphorically or literally?) descended from Ham, the cursed son of Noah (Gen. 9:25). This curse forced them to wander the earth, giving themselves over to licentiousness and devil worship.<sup>12</sup> The accusation of devil worship is rooted therefore in a racist worldview, since the curse of Ham played an important role in bolstering white supremacy. Racism and accusations of devil-worship share the same well: the gross misinterpretation of Ham's curse in Genesis 9.

Even though creative and far-reaching exegetical (or better, eisegetical) ideas supported the eradication of the devil-worshipping natives, this notion was by no means uncontested. Even the most far-fetched exegesis could not obscure the fact that the Bible does not, in fact, directly order Christians to murder anybody.<sup>13</sup> In addition, some were indeed willing to maintain that the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' should be interpreted literally. Another justification that was deployed to dissuade from killing natives was a more pragmatic argument. Greater glory could be attained if the heathens were to convert to Christianity – and being alive is, after all, a prerequisite for conversion.

### The Wilderness Myth

Lastly, theological and secular ideas merged in the third motif for conquest: the theory of the *vacuum domicilium*. If land was not occupied and used properly, it followed naturally that the people who lived in overpopulated areas could occupy this vacant land. However, one problem presented itself. The land was not particularly empty. The wilderness myth is exactly that: a purposefully constructed myth.<sup>14</sup> As a dispute that took place around

11 James Watts seems to suggest this when he writes, 'They [the settlers] argued that the Indians' idolatry condemned them to death under biblical law (Deuteronomy 17:2–7; Cave 1988, pp. 183–86):' However, this attribution to Cave's article is incorrect, since Cave's article comprises pages 277–97. I have emailed the author, and it turned out that the attribution to Deuteronomy 17 was unfortunately incorrect. Yet, as the author explained to me in an email, Deuteronomy 17 still provided a legitimizing background in the genocide of Native Americans. James W. Watts, 'Biblical Rhetoric of Separatism and Universalism and Its Intolerant Consequences', *Religions* 11, no. 4 (2020): 176, 1–10 (p. 176). Email correspondence with James Watts, 5 May 2021.

12 Cave, *Canaanites in a Promised Land*, 285.

13 Cave, *Canaanites in a Promised Land*, 286.

14 William M. Denevan, 'The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3 (1992): 369–85; William M. Denevan, 'The "Pristine Myth" Revisited', *Geographical Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 576–91.

1630 indicated, the settlers were well aware that a significant portion of the land was used by the native inhabitants for hunting and as such was not a wasteland. Even more poignantly, they recognized that the king and the nobility back in England were avid hunters as well and that hunting grounds back in England could not be seized at will.<sup>15</sup> I read, therefore, the *vacuum domicilium* argument as theologically charged. Texts like Isaiah 35:1 were used to construct the wilderness as empty, desolate, and antithetical to God's intention. These 'wilderness metaphors', as Jane Samson has named them,<sup>16</sup> therefore served an important function to legitimize conquest as the will of God.<sup>17</sup> Wilderness metaphors align the emptiness with a demonic, life-negating presence:

'A waste and howling wilderness,  
Where none inhabited,  
But hellish fiends and brutish men  
That devils worshiped.'<sup>18</sup>

According to the settlers, the 'devil-worshippers' are caught up in an eternally static position where no real progress is possible. In other words, they are the 'irreducible, satanic other'.<sup>19</sup> This idea is much more influenced by the Enlightenment than by Christianity, since the Enlightenment needed the static other as a foil for the progress in Western nations. The native population became othered as an easy rhetorical device (with deadly consequences!) to bolster the self-identity of the settlers. While the native population was thought to be caught up in a static world, the settlers thought of themselves

15 Cave, *Canaanites in a Promised Land*, 289–90.

16 While Jane Samson writes in the context of missionary efforts in Australia, her observations hold true as well for the American frontier. 'Wilderness metaphors in the Bible produced a profoundly missiological geography, encouraging the construction of desert or bushland as empty space waiting for revelation.' Jane Samson, 'Landscapes of Faith: British Missionary Tourism in the South Pacific', in *Mixed Messages: Materiality, Textuality, Missions*, ed. Jamie S. Scott and Gareth Griffiths (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89–110 (p. 93).

17 See also on the topic of moral geography: Amy DeRogatis, *Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nicholas, eds., *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

18 L. Daniel Hawk and Richard L. Twiss, 'From Good: "The Only Good Indian Is a Dead Indian" to Better: "Kill the Indian and Save the Man" to Best: "Old Things Pass Away and All Things Become White!": An American Hermeneutic of Colonization', in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, ed. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 47–60 (p. 51).

19 Hawk and Twiss, 'From Good', 51.

as founders of a new Jerusalem. We therefore cannot understand the perspective of the settlers without their apocalyptic, chiliastic thinking.<sup>20</sup> The advent of the New Jerusalem dawned in the New World.

## Indigenous Theological Contributions

This overview of the history of genocide based on a very specific Bible reading poses questions for contemporary First Nations theologians. It means that they can never encounter the Bible in a neutral way: their encounter with the Bible is shaped by the pain of the misuse of the past (and sometimes present). First Nations theologians need, therefore, to grapple with one all-decisive question: When the settlers used the Bible to legitimize conquest, is this ‘merely’ a fatal misunderstanding of the biblical narrative, or is this legitimization a logical consequence of the biblical texts themselves, especially in the book of Joshua? In other words, is the usage of the biblical texts as a legitimization of conquest a *bug* (unintentional mistake) or a *feature* (intrinsically part of the message of the Bible)?

In this section, I survey three approaches to the biblical texts that together provide a comprehensive overview of the possible positions: firstly, authors who have no interest in mending the rupture; secondly, evangelical approaches which accept and read the whole Bible normatively; and thirdly, postcolonial and feminist approaches that creatively re-appropriate certain parts of the Bible but declare other parts ‘unreadable’.

In looking at these interpretations, we should keep in mind that we are reading ‘texts of terror’. Texts of terror, a term coined by Phyllis Trible, are texts which narrate such gruesome, world- and body-shattering events that they have the possibility to rupture entire lives and worldviews. While Trible attributes this term to biblical stories about the ravaging of female bodies, such as the story of the rape of Tamar, this terminology can be applied to narratives that destroy indigenous lands and worldviews. We need to remember the past, since the past is never just past, but still present.<sup>21</sup> If we want to read the Bible in our current predicament, we need to wrestle

20 Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) played a particularly important role in popularizing chiliastic ideas. For an overview see Walter Sparr, ‘Apocalypticism, Chiliasm, and Cultural Progress: Jerusalem in Early Modern Storyworlds’, in *Tracing the Jerusalem Code*, 3 vols., *Volume 3: The Promised Land: Christian Cultures in Modern Scandinavia (ca. 1750–1920)*, ed. Ragnhild Johnsrud Zorgati and Anna Bohlin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 55–72.

21 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

with these texts, just like Jacob wrestled with a powerful opponent in the night at the Jabbok. In the words of Trible, ‘To tell and hear tales of terror is to wrestle demons in the night, without a compassionate God to save us ... But yet we hold on, seeking a blessing: the healing of wounds and the restoration of health. If the blessing comes – and we dare not claim assurance – it does not come on our terms. Indeed, as we leave the land of terror, we limp.’<sup>22</sup>

### Thinkers with No Interest in Mending the Rupture

Crystal Pardue argues that biblical texts have indeed become unreadable: the usage of pro-conquest texts is not accidental but part and parcel of the inherent character of the texts themselves. She states, ‘The European colonizers and conquerors did not misinterpret the bible. They did not twist the bible’s words. No, their actions were truly supported by biblical commandments ... The bible calls for, and Jehova-God advocates for righteous violence – precisely what empowered the conquerors and colonizers to attack the First Nations.’<sup>23</sup>

Pardue, who is the secretary of the Native American Law Students Association, deliberately writes ‘bible’ without a capital letter. This is indicative of her conviction that the B/bible can never function as an authoritative text for First Nations people, since the B/bible was used *correctly* to argue in favour of genocide. Pardue is a representative of a broader trend among First Nations academic theologians. Crystal Pardue herself currently does not identify as a Christian, since she considers the adherence to Christianity by First Nations people a form of ‘Stockholm Syndrome’.<sup>24</sup> The utter humiliation of First Nations people at the hands of the supposedly Christian colonizers caused, at least for her, a definitive rupture which, in her mind, can never be mended. And even if it were possible, she has no desire to mend the rupture.

Likewise, Vine Deloria, of Sioux heritage, is another influential voice who has no intention of mending the rupture. According to him, in an oft-quoted pithy saying, ‘I have in my lifetime concluded that Christianity is the chief evil ever to have been loosed on the planet.’<sup>25</sup> Finding inspiration in biblical sources is inherently colonial in his eyes. The only true way forward for

22 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 4.

23 Crystal Pardue, ‘Christian Devils: How the Bible Was Used to Mobilize Oppression of Native Americans’, 6 March 2018, <https://lastrealindians.com/news/2018/3/6/mar-6-2018-christian-devils-how-the-bible-was-used-to-mobilize-oppression-of-native-americans-by-crystal-pardue>.

24 Pardue, ‘Christian Devils’.

25 Quoted in Christopher Vecsey, ‘American Indians Encounter the Bible: Reception, Resistance, and Reinterpretation’, *English Language Notes* 58, no. 1 (2020): 145–57 (p. 149).

him is to find inspiration in the First Nations' own sacred rituals, history, and lands.

### Constructive Theological Proposals – Evangelical Approaches

The primary point of entry for *evangelical* conversations with First Nations Christians is the conviction that evangelical approaches to Scripture are not antithetical to postcolonial theology. Rather, a high Christology is considered to be helpful in emphasizing the specifically Christian aspect of these postcolonial theologies.<sup>26</sup> This entry point means that the focal point of indigenous postcolonial theologies is centred upon Jesus Christ. Jesus is consequently recast as an 'indigenous peasant whose message critiqued a European imperial power and the local elites who colluded with it'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Jesus is not from Europe but stands directly in opposition to Roman, and therefore European, imperialism. The fate of Jesus and the fate of indigenous peoples thus become very closely aligned: both perished because of the insatiable hunger of Europeans for power. The hermeneutical move made here is significant: a process of fusion of the indigenous peoples with Jesus. The settlers used the same hermeneutical strategy of fusion when they considered the natives to be modern Canaanites. Fusion as a hermeneutical strategy is not necessarily problematic in and of itself since it provides the readers with a poignant way of actualizing the text in their own time. But it becomes problematic when this fusion and actualization become a vehicle of death as opposed to life.

These evangelical approaches, many of which were gathered in the book *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations*, show a remarkable willingness to take the entanglement of theology, mission, and colonialism seriously and to grapple with the consequences for evangelical thought and practice.

It seems that the exclusion based on texts like Deuteronomy 17 has given way to a constructive, community-based theological vision that is rooted in two foci, both deeply Christological and indigenous. Indigenous theological leaders invest intensively in providing theological training that focuses on development of curricula that are based on the indigenous experience. The

26 Gene L. Green, 'A Response to the Postcolonial Roundtable: Promises, Problems and Prospects', in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, ed. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 19–24 (p. 21).

27 Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk, eds., 'The Postcolonial Challenge to Evangelicals', in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 25–28 (p. 26).



NAIITS, a nondenominational indigenous learning institute, offers a master's degree in theology that is based on native perspectives. The existence of theological studies from a native perspective is not just practically important in educating a new generation of students; it also plays an important role in creatively and healingly working through experiences of exclusion and transforming them – on indigenous terms. This theological project is based on a high Christology: 'a path centred in the person, work, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus that is also rooted in Indigenous cultures and histories'.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the history of Christianity is taught from the perspective of indigenous voices. This means that the mistreatment of indigenous people is not just an unfortunate accident of history but becomes the focal lens of studying Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Indigenous people theologize on their own terms, mindful of their traumatic legacy, while they are also in connection with the worldwide church and have thereby found a way of subverting exclusion and negotiating inclusion – on their own terms.<sup>30</sup>

### Constructive Theological Proposals – Feminist Approaches

While some American Indian thinkers maintain that the Bible in its totality is not fit to be used in any normative way for indigenous people, and while evangelical interpretations proceed from the assumption that the biblical message can be applied in a life-giving way to the lived experience of Native Americans, feminist approaches are looking for a middle road. Laura Donaldson argues that quite a number of biblical stories are no longer readable for American Indians. She mentions stories like the conquest of Canaan, the story of Ruth, and the Great Commandment as written in Matthew.<sup>31</sup> These stories deal with the encounter of non-Israelite people, such as Ruth from Moab, and end with conquest and religious assimilation, which is from a native perspective a non-desired outcome. However, some stories, though not many, can be read anew, such as the story of the birth of Jesus. The re-reading of these stories from the perspective of a native cosmology will render them quite differently from the typical interpretations known in Western Christianity.

28 'Vision', NAIITS, accessed 18 October 2022, <http://naiits.org/vision/>.

29 'Academics', NAIITS, accessed 18 October 2022, <https://www.naiits.com/academics/mts/>.

30 See also the volume of the *Journal of NAIITS* 14 (2016) that is completely dedicated to the issue of education. See in particular the essay by Kelsey Dayle John, who argues for the necessity of decolonized methodologies in theological education. Kelsey Dayle John, 'Re-Visiting Theological Questions for Decolonizing Education', *Journal of NAIITS* 14 (2016): 33–42.

31 Laura E. Donaldson, 'Native Women's Double Cross: Christology from the Contact Zone', *Feminist Theology* 10, no. 29 (2002): 96–117 (p. 107).

Bible stories are interpreted in the so-called *contact zone*, the dynamic and fluid liminal meeting space where colonial and indigenous worldviews meet one another. This *contact zone* signals that indigenous peoples interpreted biblical stories for their own reasons and shaped them according to their own interpretive categories. This means that the agency of interpretation is placed firmly on the side of the indigenous peoples. The *contact zone* means that we cannot naively adopt colonial terminology such as ‘penetration’<sup>32</sup> of the message to the natives. Instead, entanglement provides a more adequate term.<sup>33</sup>

An important example of this creative agency on the part of the indigenous peoples is the re-telling of the birth of Christ by a Cherokee woman, Chekelelee Edna. She construed Jesus as being in the centre of the four directions of the wind, with Jesus turning to each direction. ‘Spinning on a life-affirming axis, he [Jesus] turns east, the color of red, to honor the success and efficaciousness of God; he turns south, the color of white, to honor the peace of God; he turns west, the color of black, to honor the dead; and he turns north, the color of blue, to honor God’s wisdom. Finally, he orients himself toward earth, the color of green, because he honors his Mother.’<sup>34</sup>

This Christology depicts Christ in Cherokee cosmological and spatial terms, and answers Jesus’s question “Who do you say I am” (Mark 8:27) in its own terms. Christ becomes transformed in this process of re-interpretation: Christ truly becomes at home in a Cherokee village.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

Listening to the voices of First Nations theologians is an integral part of the agenda of postcolonial theory. This act of listening is rooted in a postcolonial

32 Penetration is not just a technical term used to describe the act of entering something but has an explicitly sexual connotation as well. This sexual connotation is not accidental and belongs to the heart of the colonial logic, since the colonized lands were seen as ‘virgin’, lying awaiting penetration. For a clear overview of the intertwining of sexually charged language and the colonial endeavour, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

33 One could expect the word ‘inculturation’ here, but this is a word that is more at home in a missiological discourse than in a postcolonial or a feminist perspective, since both criticize the rather monolithic ideas of culture encapsulated in the word ‘inculturation’. Also, from a missiological perspective, the word ‘inculturation’ has sustained some criticism, for example from Felix Wilfred, who laments that even though a theology of inculturation was applied to predominantly Roman Catholic mission efforts in Asia, the resulting Christian praxis is not decisively Asian enough. Felix Wilfred, *Margins, Site of Asian Theologies* (Delphi: ISPCK, 2008), 136–37.

34 Donaldson, ‘Native Women’s Double Cross’, 105–6.

epistemology, namely the conviction that the knowledge that is produced by (formerly) subjugated peoples is fundamentally different from knowledge produced in the colonial centres. The knowledge derived from the experiences of marginalization and subjugation is different precisely because it is *embodied* knowledge, knowledge that originates from *bodily* experiences of discrimination, displacement, and disfigurement. The gaze from the colonial centres is muddled precisely because the consequences of the actions for the colonized subjects disappear or are made of secondary importance. Yet, in the words of one of the most cited slogans of postcolonial theory, *the empire writes back*.<sup>35</sup> In this section I describe three possible ways forward: creating space for lament, altering our preaching and teaching, and changing our mission practices.

### Creating Space for Lament

Deuteronomy 17 commands the stoning of people who worship other gods and who bow down before the sun, the moon, or the stars. This violent condemnation of apostasy has caused real and intergenerational harm in the lives of First Nations people. The actualization of this text during the conquest of the Americas has caused ruptures that, at least for a segment of First Nations people, are beyond healing.<sup>36</sup>

This means that we need to wrestle with this difficult realization: the b/ Bible, the foundational text of our religion, has functioned as legitimization for genocide. Contemporary readers must be honest about this reality. This realization might evoke difficult emotions: of disbelief, shock, sadness, or guilt. These are our emotions to come to terms with. A decolonial reading should be able to be open to the possibility that First Nations theologians can teach us uncomfortable truths about the Bible.

When we apply the insights of postcolonial theory to the topic at hand, we realize that we need this perspective of First Nations people in order to understand the full weight and full meaning of Deuteronomy 17. We need to allow the experiences of First Nations people to shape our understanding of the 'long shadows' that Deuteronomy 17 has cast. In other words, we need the practice of lament. Lament for what is lost and what could have been. Lament is rooted in the biblical praxis of attending to the destruction of Jerusalem

35 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

36 For a missiology of lament, see Eleonora Dorothea Hof, 'A Missiology of Lament', *Swedish Missiological Themes* 101, no. 3-4 (2013): 321-38.

and the loss of an entire world. Lament is always fraught and complex: it does not only attend to grief and loss but also to the question of guilt – and the perpetuation of guilt, including the question of intergenerational guilt.

### **Altering our Preaching and Teaching**

A reading of Deuteronomy 17 that takes the voices of indigenous theologians seriously has the ability to shape the way we preach and teach in church. It is therefore not a purely academic matter but has real-world consequences. In the first place, these readings of First Nations thinkers challenge us to see the Bible in a more comprehensive light; while Bible reading has, presumably, positive effects in our lives, this is not a universal outcome. Certain pericopes from Deuteronomy and Joshua have been used to legitimize genocide, and this usage leaves a wound that is not yet healed. Contemporary readers do not read the Bible in a vacuum. We read the Bible together with 'all the saints'. And we read the Bible together with all those people who do not want to be categorized as saints or believers, since their lives and the lives of their ancestors are shaped by the unholy usage of the biblical texts.

It almost comes naturally to non-native Christians to identify with the people of Israel who were delivered out of slavery in Egypt and inherited the promised land. But is it possible for those of us who are non-native to switch our hermeneutical lens around and identify ourselves with the oppressors instead of with those who are liberated out of bondage? Robert Allen Warrior, himself a member of the Osage Nation,<sup>37</sup> suggests that contemporary readers should place the Canaanites at the centre of both theology and action. In this way, what is deliberately forgotten in the text comes to light.<sup>38</sup> Readers need to centre the Canaanites, because the Biblical texts as they present themselves to us pose a great danger: 'History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.'<sup>39</sup> Even though the actual history of conquest might be significantly different from the narrative, we do not have access to the history; we read the narrative. The god represented in the text will remain as long as the text remains.<sup>40</sup>

I suggest that the plight of the Native Americans provides a challenge to the way we approach the colonial history in the Netherlands and Belgium.

37 Robert Allen Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians', in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 279.

38 Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective', 283.

39 Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective', 280.

40 Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective', 282.

Doing theology in the Netherlands and Belgium entails not only listening to the perspective of native voices but also conducting creative theology on the crossroads between indigenous traditions of formerly colonized peoples and contemporary culture in the Netherlands and Belgium. The work of Simon Ririhena is an example of this type of theological work that is necessary and deserves broad recognition. He advocates that the *Pela* – as practised on the Molucca Islands – can function as a cornerstone for Moluccan theology in the Netherlands.<sup>41</sup>

### Changed Mission Practices

The exclusion embedded in Deuteronomy 17 can be turned around by engaging in explicitly decolonizing mission practices. The discipline of missiology is well underway in the process of a landmark shift from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere, from top-down to bottom-up thinking, and from the centre to the periphery.

This monumental shift has consequences for mission practices, since mission needs to actively engage with decolonial processes. Most pressingly, racial reconciliation and racial justice need to be addressed. Mission agencies have inherited an organizational structure with personnel in the sending countries who are predominantly white, even though many Christians from formerly missionized countries now live in the countries that colonized them. Shared and equal leadership should be a priority.

And with shared leadership, the possibilities of more shared practices arise, including the possibility of arriving at a shared praxis of reading the Bible. Those practices entail the reading of texts that have influenced colonial practices, ‘texts of terror’, such as Deuteronomy 17, and life-affirming texts which can guide a new and positive vision for the future.

### Conclusion

We learn from the stories of Native American theologians how they deal with exclusion: how they appropriate texts that were not written with their experiences in mind and that have historically been used to legitimize conquest and brought trauma upon their lives. We discussed three different strategies employed by indigenous thinkers in a North American context:

<sup>41</sup> S. Ririhena, *Christus, de Pela par excellence: De Christologie van de Pela als hart van de Molukse theologie in Nederland* (Apeldoorn: ISMC, 2014).

discrediting the texts from the B/bible altogether; reinterpreting the biblical text in a framework that is both Christological and indigenous; and salvaging specific texts while abandoning most of the biblical texts. For those of us who cherish the totality of the biblical testimony, the first and third approach might be painful. I therefore suggest taking these approaches seriously and not discarding them too easily, since they speak to the innumerable pain inflicted by a life-destroying interpretation of the biblical texts. We need to be clear: hermeneutics that aids oppression, whether it be small-scale exclusions or large-scale genocide, is false hermeneutics and needs to be denounced. Only if we are vigorous in denouncing the hermeneutics that aided in the atrocities against Native Americans can we have hope of a new dialogical hermeneutic in which we enter a fruitful dialogue with First Nations theologians.

Lament for the real losses that have been suffered as a result of exclusionary readings, including that of Deuteronomy 17, is therefore a necessity. The praxis of lament is a way to bring together the past, present, and future in one perspective: we remember the past, we acknowledge that it casts its shadows over our present, and we work actively towards a life-giving future.

When we are reading exclusionary texts like Deuteronomy 17 – in church, for the purpose of mission, or in our personal life – we can never read them again in a vacuum, since these texts have been used historically to legitimize the destruction of Native American systems of belief. We can never go back to a ‘naïve’ reading of these texts but need to take the real-world consequences into account. We need to take seriously the ‘text of terror’ that still rings dramatically in our ears: ‘and stone that person to death’, the verdict for those who were found guilty of worshipping the sun, moon, and stars. It has not been the scope of this study to conduct a complete exegesis of Deuteronomy 17; other contributions in this volume provide such an exegesis. This contribution has attempted instead to show how the mechanisms of exclusion that we witness in Deuteronomy 17 and other, similar texts, still echo in the present day due to the context of settler-colonialism in which they were employed. It has therefore been fruitful to take a look at the specifics of the hermeneutics employed by the settlers and to distance ourselves forcefully from this hermeneutic, while still acknowledging the damage this particular reading has done.

To conclude, it is my strong conviction that contemporary readers should let our reading of Deuteronomy 17, and similar texts, be informed by people who have suffered the consequences of exclusionary readings – and as a Christian community, we should be willing to adopt a truly decolonizing stance in our Bible readings.

### **About the author**

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# 15 The Pela as a Model for Inclusive Peacebuilding

*Simon Ririhena*

## **Abstract**

For centuries Muslim and Christian Pelas in the Moluccas were able to live peacefully alongside and with each other. The Pela is an intervillage blood covenant based on a common worldview, anchored in traditional Nunusaku or Ambon religion. It was this common origin and their interpersonal relationships, a loose form of horizontal syncretism between Christians and Muslims, that prevailed over religious differences. Despite the advent of civil war in 1999, pitting Muslim and Christian villages against each other, the majority of Moluccans believe that the Pela can promote cooperation between communities and different faith groups. In a polarized world we can learn from the meaning, limitations, and possibilities of the Pela alliance between Christians and Muslims in the Moluccas.

**Keywords:** blood covenant, common origin, horizontal syncretism, humanity

## **Introduction**

The Pela existed long before the arrival of the monotheistic religions. In the Moluccas a Pela, a bilateral blood covenant, was established after a bloody battle between villages over scarce resources. The rules of the covenant were laid down in a Pela ceremony, and these rules also applied to the following generations. One of the most important rules was that Pelas were to each other in good times and in adversity. Their alliance secured peace and stability. An important reason why the Pela has survived for centuries is that Moluccans have a common origin on the island of Ceram or, as it is



called in the native language, Nusa Ina, Mother Island. The other reason is the awareness that the ancestors who witnessed the Pela ceremony are also the guardians of the covenant. They can intervene and punish if one does not follow the Pela rules.

When the civil war broke out in the Moluccas in 1999, several Pela villages were pitted against each other. After the Malino peace agreement in 2002, the parties involved concluded that respecting the Pela could have prevented civil war, that provocateurs had used religion to incite Christians against Muslims, and that this had essentially been a local conflict. Both Muslims and Christians wanted a reappraisal of Pela. Although peace is still fragile, the vast majority of both groups believe that the Christian–Muslim relationship is good and constructive. An example where Pela rules were broken and the ancestors intervened was in the conflict between the two Pela villages of Buano Utara (Muslim) and Buano Selatan (Christian). After the fighting, the villagers wanted to give value to the Pela once more with a *panas Pela* (literally, ‘heating up the Pela’), a renewal of the Pela. This may not have happened in the traditional form, but dismissing the Pela as an obsolete symbol went too far for the villagers.

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington states that the relation between Islam and Christianity is ‘deeply conflictual’.<sup>1</sup> This idea is challenged by rituals like the Pela. I contend that the significance of the Pela is not limited to the Moluccas but can act as a model in many polarized societies.

## Huntington’s Conflict Model of Muslim-Christian Relations

Huntington’s book mentions the extremely fragile boundaries between civilizations.<sup>2</sup> His theory of the new world order after the Cold War was first published in 1993 in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. He wrote as follows:

1 Samuel, P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 209.

2 Exactly what Huntington means by civilization is rather vague. Some argue that the civilizations he identified are fragmented and show little internal unity. For example, the Islamic world is enormously divided, among other things into ethnic groups, since Kurds, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Pakistanis, and Indonesians all have different worldviews. Furthermore, there are two main branches of Islam: the Sunnis and the Shiites. Another point of criticism is that the criteria for the division are unclear. See for example, Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2007); Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.<sup>3</sup>

Huntington's book may be used by some as a set of predictions that are coming true in the twenty-first century. However, he presented his book as 'a framework, a paradigm, for viewing global politics that will be meaningful to scholars and useful to policymakers'.<sup>4</sup> He lists nine civilizations: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese.<sup>5</sup>

The events of 11 September 2001 in America made Huntington's arguments mainstream and put them centre stage, especially as far as they concerned relations between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world'.<sup>6</sup>

The 9/11 attacks had been preceded by others which, with hindsight, could be seen as initial signs of a 'civilizational war' between the West and the Muslim world. A first jihadi assault on the Twin Towers in 1993 was followed

2003); Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, last modified 4 October 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>. Incidentally, Huntington himself adapts his theory in the direction of a deeper consideration of demographics in his explanation of war, social unrest, and violence. He writes, 'One major theme absent from the article concerns the crucial impact of population growth on instability, and the balance of power.' See *The Clash of Civilizations*, 13.

3 Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49 (p. 22).

4 Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 13.

5 Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 26, 27 map 1.3.

6 'Both Islam and Christianity are both civilizations with a message, a utopia. A civilization with a message will always clash with other civilizations. They are exclusive and intolerant. Since the Christian and Islamic civilizations have their roots in the Old Testament and both have a message to conquer the world, the confrontation will be very fierce. The Western world and Islam will not easily come to be on speaking terms, as both have a utopia, with different centers of power. In the midst of those cultural clashes, the only right thing a Christian can do is martyrdom instead of resorting to weapons and using violence.' Abraham van de Beek, 'Christians in the Clash of Civilizations' in *Studies in Reformed Theology, Christian Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, vol. 8, ed. Martien E. Brinkman, Dirk van Keulen (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 97–110 (p. 108).

in 1998 by attacks on two US embassies in Africa. The 1993 and 1998 attacks, coupled with 9/11, seemed to some to be clear signs that Islamist extremists were willing to take the 'clash of civilizations' to the stage of open conflict with the US. [...] For some scholars, analysts and policy makers – especially but not exclusively in the United States – 9/11 marked the practical onset of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' between two cultural entities: the 'Christian West' and the 'Islamic world', with special concern directed at Islamic 'fundamentalists' or 'radical terrorists'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet there are also opposing concepts that are not based on clashes between cultures and ethnic groups but promote a paradigm of dialogue and connection. At the 59th United Nations General Assembly (2005), for example, the Spanish President Rodriguez Zapatero proposed an Alliance of Civilizations.<sup>8</sup> Long before President Rodriguez Zapatero presented his initiative, the intervillage blood alliance, the Pela, existed in the Moluccas to establish lasting peace between two warring villages. We will now consider the meaning and significance of the Pela more closely.

### The Inclusiveness of the Moluccan Pela Blood Covenant

Pela is an alliance between one or more villages, often on different islands and adhering to different religions.<sup>9</sup> Etymologically, the word Pela means 'to stop immediately', 'to cease'.<sup>10</sup> The inclusiveness of the Pela is evidenced by the fact that Pela unions between Christian villages and between

7 Jeffrey Haynes, 'Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" Today: Responses and Developments', *E-International Relations*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.e-ir-info /2018/05/01/huntingtons-clash-of-civilizations>.

8 The initiative aims to encourage concerted action across societies to fight extremism, to break down cultural and social barriers mainly between the West and the Muslim world, and to reduce the tensions and the intensification of contradictions between societies due to differences in religious and cultural values. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes already wrote in his work *Leviathan* (1651) that people should make firm agreements with each other (social contract) about how they want to live peacefully next to and with each other. If they cannot conclude a covenant with binding conditions, society will fall into a situation of permanent war of everyone against everyone. See Philip Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers* (London: Arcturus, 2003).

9 Dieter Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) After a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-existence and Ethnic Unity', [http://www.nunusaku.com/03\\_publications/articles/yourgod.html](http://www.nunusaku.com/03_publications/articles/yourgod.html).

10 Dieter Bartels, 'Guarding the Invisible Mountain: Intervillage Alliance, Religious Syncretism and Identity among Ambonese Christians and Moslems in the Moluccas' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1977), 57, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Christian and Muslim villages can be found all over the Central Moluccas. It is, however, not only an inter-religious but also an inter-ethnic alliance, such as the alliance of the village of Kuda Mati (Central Moluccas) with the South Moluccan Kei Besar and Kei Kecil. Pela is almost always an alliance between two villages. However, another Pela alliance between Benteng (Central Moluccas) and the inhabitants of the South Moluccan Kei Islands includes a village with an entire region. This is exceptional but at the same time indicates the flexibility of the Pela.

Over time the term 'covenant' was used to translate Pela. The Pela system has its origins in the distant past, long before Europeans invaded the Spice Islands in search of cloves and nutmeg. It probably started as an alliance system in the context of head-hunting. During the Portuguese and Dutch conquests in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the system was utilized to resist the foreign intruders and to help each other in times of need. As a matter of fact, quite a few of the still existing Pela pacts were founded during that period, often binding Muslim and (recently converted) Christian villages together. Today Pela is in full bloom, mainly as a vehicle of Moluccan identity in the pan-Indonesian state and for the Moluccans in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup>

Pela has two types: the soft Pela and the hard Pela. Soft Pelas were established after some minor event, such as to restore peace after a small incident or after one village did a favour for another. They also were established to facilitate trade relations.<sup>12</sup> The hard Pela was often entered into after a fierce battle for scarce goods between two villages and was sealed with blood.<sup>13</sup> Our focus is on the hard Pela.

Entering a Pela was ratified in a ceremony. The ceremony has four elements: The first is *Ankat* (to raise, lift). Both *rajas* (village heads) decide to stop fighting and promote and guard peace by making a covenant. As was noted, the original meaning of Pela is 'to stop immediately'. The second element is *Ikat* (to close, bind, connect, empower). What is said and done in the ceremony is binding for all inhabitants of the two villages. The third

11 Dieter Bartels, 'Pela Alliances in the Central Moluccas and in the Netherlands: A Brief Guide for Beginners', [http://www.nunusaku.com/pdfs/Guide for Beginners/Pela Alliances in the Central Moluccas and the Netherlands.pdf](http://www.nunusaku.com/pdfs/Guide%20for%20Beginners/Pela%20Alliances%20in%20the%20Central%20Moluccas%20and%20the%20Netherlands.pdf), 2.

12 Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine'.

13 The hard pela originated as a result of the occurrence of some major event, usually war-related, such as the spilling of blood, undecided battles, or extraordinary help given by one village to the other. See Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine'. See also S. Ririhena, *Christus, de Pela par excellence: De Christologie van de Pela als hart van de Molukse theologie in Nederland* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2014), 53.

element is *Minum* (to drink): a concoction of palm wine and blood taken from the leaders of the two parties is drunk by all the members of both villages after the immersion of weapons and other sharp objects in it. These objects will turn against and kill any offender. The exchange of blood seals the brotherhood.<sup>14</sup> They now have the same blood flowing through their veins: they are 'brothers and sisters' to each other. The last element is *Sumpah* (to take an oath, swear, to make promises). The Pela is concluded through a powerful oath which is backed up with a terrible curse upon any potential transgressor of the treaty.<sup>15</sup> At the ceremony the ancestors are invited to witness the covenant. They watch over the promises and rules made in the ceremony.<sup>16</sup> 'It is precisely for this reason that, according to Moluccan religion, human beings are socio-metaphysical beings. Communities who partake in a Pela are bound to the supernatural world of the ancestors. This socio-metaphysical bond remains efficacious for generations.'<sup>17</sup>

Even if a Moluccan does not want to have anything to do with Pela, their last name and the common ancestral history of Nunusaku mean they cannot get rid of it. Their surname refers to the village of their ancestors and thus to a Pela village. Pela members recognize each other, wherever they are in the world, by their surnames. It is not the geographical location that determines whether there are Pelas but the interaction between members of a Pela, regardless of place, faith, ethnicity, or generation. Pela is valid for four generations. When a great-great granddaughter with blond hair and blue eyes, without knowing about the phenomenon Pela, hands over her passport at the counter at the airport in Singapore and says her family name, somewhere in the hall 'Pelaeee' is heard. The sound of her last name connects her to the Pela who happen to be there. Just as the tiger cannot get rid of its stripes just because it wants to become another creature, neither can a partaker in the Pela.<sup>18</sup>

14 Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine'.

15 Dieter Bartels, 'Alliances Without Marriage: Exogamy, Economic Exchange, and Symbolic Unity Among Ambonese Christian and Moslems', <http://www.nunusaku.com/pdfs/alliances.pdf>, 2.

16 Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 69. See also Charles A. Wanamaker, 'Jesus the Ancestor: Reading the Story of Jesus from an African Christian Perspective', *Scriptura* 3 (1997): 281–98. In the same way that Moluccan ancestors watch over the Pela, African ancestors watch over their offspring and the preservation of the symbols and rituals of the tradition.

17 Ririhena, 'Christus, de Pela', 60. Translation mine.

18 In principle the Pela is as efficacious in Amsterdam as it would be in Singapore, but the direction and orientation is of influence. The terms 'thick and thin description' (Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York: Basic Books, 1973]) would be more appropriate here. Orientation for the Moluccas in terms of identity formation can be characterized as thick description.

## Moluccan Adat and Christian-Muslim Relations

Pela is closely associated with the Moluccan creation story, which is set on the invisible mountain Nunusaku on the island of Ceram. The first Moluccans lived on that mountain, but because of a murder, they were banished from Nunusaku by the gods in two large groups. This banishment is also known as *Heka Nunusaka* (*Heka* means 'to break up', 'to break down'). Between the two groups, the Ulilima and Ulisiwa, there were animosity and wars from the beginning of the exile, which were stopped with a Pela. Pela is also referred to as Nunusaku's vehicle to restore the peace that existed in paradise. From this perspective, Pela is also seen as *Leka Nunusaku* (*Leka* means 'to bring together', 'to merge'). According to Moluccan traditions, the ancestors of both Moluccan Muslims and Christians all came from Nunusaku.

When Islam and Christianity were introduced, certain Pela villages chose Islam, while others chose Christianity. That choice was respected by both villages for centuries.

While belief in the traditional gods was abandoned in favour of belief in one God, the *Adat* (the Indonesian term for customs and tradition), which included the Pela, was preserved by Muslims and Christians alike. Their common *Adat* emphasizes what they have in common rather than their differences. Bartels comments that 'largely disinterested in dogma and ideology and relatively unaffected by, or even ignorant of, the historical enmity between Muslims and Christians elsewhere, the Moluccans were unbiased enough to perceive, and stress, the many similarities that exist among the two religions. The emphasis on the similarities led to attempts of harmonization, resulting in a kind of loose "horizontal" syncretism between Islam and Christianity.'<sup>19</sup> The *Adat* served as the cement for this.

Christianity, Islam, or any new religion, when entering a culture, undergoes a process of syncretism or dialectic. This became clear during the civil war, where the emphasis was placed on differences. The Christians, for example, displayed large murals along the roads of Jesus as saviour and protector of Ambon City. The Muslims were also not indifferent in this regard.<sup>20</sup>

19 Dieter Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) After a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-existence and Ethnic Unity', in *A State of Emergency: Violence, Society and the State in Eastern Indonesia*, ed. Sandra Pannell (Darwin: Northern Territory University press, 2003), 128–53 (p.130).

20 Patricia Spyer, 'Christ at Large. Iconography and Territoriality in Postwar Ambon', in *Religion Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 524–50 (pp. 531–34).

Despite the differences that were magnified during the war, both sides reunited because they realized that they had common roots in traditional kinship systems such as the Pela. For them, interpersonal relations prevailed over religiocentrism.

Upu Lanite, the God of the Heavens, was eventually equated with Allah, the name used by both groups for the God of the Koran and the God of the Bible. Thus, there was only one God and Islam and Christianity were seen as two alternate but equally valid paths to salvation. As time passed the Ambonese came to view Islam and Christianity as basically being only variations of the same faith.<sup>21</sup>

This became the basis of Moluccan Muslim–Christian peaceful coexistence and their ethnic identity, with enough space to be a faithful Muslim and a faithful Christian. Although both religions have their common origin on Nunusaku, they each live by their own rules of belief.<sup>22</sup>

The general Pela rules that must be strictly adhered to are as follows: 1) Stand by each other for better or worse. For example, when building a church or mosque or helping each other in case of a natural disaster. 2) Always keep promises. 3) When Pela ask for something, like food or lodging, it is not permitted to refuse. 4) In the hard Pela, members are not allowed to marry each other (exogamous) because they have ‘the same’ blood in their veins. The rules may vary slightly from one Pela to another, but the essence is to help each other in all circumstances. Rachel Iwamony, an associate professor at the Christian University UKIM (Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku) in Ambon, illustrates these small variations in her book *The Reconciliatory Potential of the Pela in The Moluccas*.<sup>23</sup> Is Pela still respected and observed in modern times?

## A Fratricidal War

In 1999 things went terribly wrong in the Moluccas. It started with an innocent disagreement between a Christian Moluccan taxi driver and a

21 Bartels, ‘Your God Is No Longer Mine’, 130.

22 In his dissertation Bartels writes that under the large and dense foliage of the waringin tree on the invisible mountain, both Christians and Muslims could take shelter. It is this invisible religion that transcends both religions. See Bartels, ‘Guarding the Invisible Mountain’, 316.

23 Rachel Iwamony, *The Reconciliatory Potential of the Pela in The Moluccas* (Amsterdam: VU Press, 2010), 70.

Buginese Muslim passenger about the price for the ride. What started as a disagreement over a taxi ride turned into a tragic religious war within a few months. The antagonistic discourse that emerged was aptly reported in a Dutch newspaper thus: 'Muslims say the last church bell will ring on 9-9-'99. Christians take comfort in the thought that on January 1, 2000, all Muslims will be converted to Christianity. And there are many more messages from Ambon, which only point to one thing: it is war in the Moluccas!'<sup>24</sup> Almost overnight, Christians and Muslims faced each other as enemies.<sup>25</sup>

How could this happen? Moluccan researchers have examined the historical, political, social, religious, economic, and cultural contexts and have concluded that 'local unrest must be understood in a national and even international framework, and therefore, one needs to be aware of the connection, for example, between the international resurgence of militant Islam and communal tensions in Maluku, and disagreement among political elite groups in Jakarta and the continuing violence in Ambon. In this sense, the Moluccan conflict is to some extent borderless.'<sup>26</sup>

The fratricidal war destroyed the image of the Moluccan tradition with its many cultural institutions that ensured harmony and sustainability. The conflict has disrupted the order between communities. What has happened

24 M. M. van't Foort en T. Van't Foort, 'Het is oorlog in de Molukken', *Trouw*, 3 September 1999, 1. Translation mine.

25 Spyer, 'Christ at Large', 524. Her research focused on the post-war proliferation of billboard portraits of Jesus and gigantic murals rising out of the ruins of war along the city's main thoroughfares and at Christian neighbourhood gateways. In so doing the painters confirm the insistent claim that God is/was here, present, and truly here, watching over Ambon.

26 Hermien S. Sospelisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua: Conflict and Resource Management in Central Maluku', *Cakalele*, 11 (2000): 67–82, 68.

'In the late 1990s, a global economic crisis that also affected Asia and an emerging political opposition undermined President Suharto's position. The strong inflation led to discontent and unrest. Students protested and were violently suppressed. However, Suharto's regime could not resist, and he was forced to resign in May 1998.' 'His departure brought great chaos in Indonesia. The army could no longer maintain order and caused a wave of violence between the old powers and the rebellious bourgeoisie. During the same period, the group of orthodox Muslims grew and the tension between Christians and Muslims increased – first in Jakarta, then in the Moluccas, among others. However, it was not just a religious war. At the root were power inequalities between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority and inter-ethnic conflicts between the original inhabitants and the immigrants from Sulawesi and Java. In the power vacuum after Suharto's fall, political elites played groups off against each other. The Moluccas thus became a political playing field of power struggles that were eventually fought out along religious lines.' See Elizabeth van Dis, *Molukse Moslim-Christenrelaties. Oorlogsherinneringen en toekomstperspectieven* (Utrecht: Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen, 2015), 18. See also Hermien S. Sospelisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua: Conflict and Resource Management in Central Maluku', *Cakalele*, 11 (2000): 67–82 (pp. 67–68).



to these traditional institutions and Moluccan arrangements for living together?<sup>27</sup> I will give an example of two rival Pela villages. It concerns two villages on the island of Buano that together have a Pela and profess different faiths. The two villages, Buano Utara and Buano Selatan, are located very close to each other. Buano Utara is a Muslim village and is the larger of the two. According to *Adat*, tradition, their ancestors came from Nunusaku, a sacred and secret place on the island of Ceram. The conflict between the two villages demonstrated that the *Adat* institution of Pela was unable to prevent the violence and tensions. According to Hermien Sospelisa, a professor of Anthropology at Pattimura University in Ambon, this was partly caused by external events that had an impact on an isolated community and partly by inter-generational differences in both villages.<sup>28</sup>

Some elderly people from Buano said that the tensions between generations arose because young people were going to work and study outside the island of Buano. When they returned after a while, they found that *Adat* institutions such as the Pela were no longer effective in this modern age.

Not only were there intergenerational tensions, but there were also conflicts between the two villages. The first was a conflict over sea fishing grounds in 1983, and the second conflict, in 2000, involved religious violence that left many dead or injured and houses burned.

### **The Violation of the Pela and the Role of the Pela in the Post-Conflict Situation**

As has been noted, in addition to the socio-economic and political causes of the conflict, some Christian and Muslim Moluccans attributed the conflict to a declining adherence to the *Adat* and to a sense of increased ethnic solidarity among younger Moluccans. These ethno-religious dimensions in the interpretation of the conflict are illustrated by the interpretation of an epidemic, which occurred after the war. After the incidents there was an epidemic in the attacking village Buano Utara, and it was widely believed to be the effect of the violence, which should not have happened between these two villages because they were tied by (Pela) kinship. The epidemic was seen by some as vengeance (*bahala*) of the ancestors for the attack on their kin, and these people argued that such conflicts must be avoided in the future.<sup>29</sup>

27 Sospelisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 69.

28 Sospelisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 72–73.

29 Sospelisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 73.

However, the elderly realized that young people had a different explanation for the outbreak of the disease. They did not see the disease as a punishment from the ancestors. Rather, they sought connections to the wider world, overruling their own ethnic identity as Buano people and their loyalty to *Adat* institutions.<sup>30</sup>

In the Buano case, the local intergenerational gap and the local political situation played an important role in the breakdown of relations between two nearby villages in the context of regional conflict. During the conflict it became clear that ethnic identity had weakened to such an extent that it could not dominate and restrain religious identification and solidarity, and it could not prevent religious conflict.

In light of such ethno-religious interpretations, and in order to safeguard peace, it would seem beneficial for local Moluccan communities to consider identifying and strengthening their *Adat* institutions and other local arrangements for cooperation between communities, especially those with different faiths. Local mutual arrangements related to economic activity (such as that on Buano) may also be effective in rebuilding cooperation between communities at the pragmatic level.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, inter-village alliances such as Pela, which operate at a more abstract level, may be activated, for example, through more regular Pela renewal (*panas Pela*, 'heating up') ceremonies. During the conflict some Pela partners from different faiths still continued to honour their alliances by refraining from mutual attacks, although joint defence was rarely found.<sup>32</sup>

Characteristic of Pela is that it is a single pact only between two (sometimes more) villages, and if a village has multiple alliances with several villages, each pact is unrelated to any other. To support reconciliation and eliminate conflict, this inclusive bond may be modified to form an extended network, such that all villages involved in the multiple pacts of a village are also connected to each other indirectly as allies.<sup>33</sup> In this way, the exclusiveness of Pela would guarantee the inclusion of all people – starting in the Moluccas, then Indonesia, and then the rest of humanity who want peace and stability.

This renewed interpretation of the Pela has been advocated by some Muslim and Christian scholars. On the Muslim side, law scholar M. G.

30 Soselisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 74–75.

31 Soselisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 79.

32 Soselisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 79–80.

33 Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine'. See also S. Ririhena, 'Christus, de Pela', 2014, 154–55. See also Soselisa, 'Sagu Salempeng Tapata Dua', 80. See also Bartels, 'Guarding the Invisible Mountain', 1977 and Iwamony, *The Reconciliatory Potential*, 82–83.

Ohorella would like to see the *Pela gandong* (hard *Pela*) concept modernized and formalized to become a 'new force (*gaya baru*) in a process of renewal of Muslim-Christian relations'.<sup>34</sup> On the Christian side, Rachel Iwamony emphasizes 'that *Pela*, a local culture, also offers conceptions for reconciliation. However, it cannot reach outsiders. Therefore, it must be transformed in order to spread its virtues widely.'<sup>35</sup> The elders of Buano saw the cause of conflict in disrespecting *Pela*. The government was encouraged to restore *Pela* in order to perpetuate the peace.<sup>36</sup> Tjitske Lingsma, a journalist, regularly visited the Moluccas. She gave an interview to the national newspaper *Trouw*, which I quote here at length:

There is no question of a deeply felt reconciliation. Reconciliation means people talking to each other again, but talking about the conflict itself has become taboo. What you yourself have been up to is kept silent, even during those reconciliation sessions. I've also been to a reconciliation school where one of the main rules is not to talk about the conflict. So reconciliation without truth...But is that possible, reconciliation without truth? Maybe the civil war will disappear as a very dark page in history, like there are so many of those dark pages in Indonesia's history that are never really explored, and people just go on living. A Christian child soldier in a rehabilitation program remembers washing each other's feet. Feet are dirty. So when you accept each other's feet, you really accept each other. It is in essence about humanity and respect also for his Muslim *Pela*.<sup>37</sup>

If *Pela* is not to lose meaning in the twenty-first century, it will have to be contextualized in the post-Malino era. The chance of reconciliation could be greater if *Pela* is restored according to the Ambonese<sup>38</sup> *Adat*. A recent study

34 Ririhena, 'Christus, de *Pela*', 150. However, even if the interreligious *pela* survives, it is too focused on parochial concerns to be employed to achieve new harmony and intra-ethnic balance. Even Ohorella's expanded scheme still is too fragmented. Perhaps only a formal establishment of an all-encompassing grand '*Pela Gandong*' between all Ambonese Moslems and Christians will restore harmony. This new pact would symbolically seal whatever is agreed on to normalize the relationship. It would also epitomize a regeneration of indigenous verities. See also Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine', 128–53

35 Iwamony, *The Reconciliatory*, 22.

36 Wilma Kieskamp, 'De vergeten oorlog', *Trouw*, 13 November 1999.

37 Gert Jan Rohmensen, 'Molukken. Verzoening zonder waarheid', *Trouw*, 29 April 2008, 1. Translation mine.

38 Bartels prefers the word 'Ambonese' to 'Moluccan' because in colonial times all Moluccans, regardless of their ethnic diversity, were called Ambonese after the capital of the same name. See Dieter Bartels, 'From Black Dutchman to White Moluccans' (paper presented at Conference on

shows that there is great support for this idea for two reasons: First, a majority of Moluccan citizens believe that the relationship between Muslims and Christians is presently good and that a conflict will not repeat itself because of the traditional law (*Adat*) and the ancient Pela kinship bans. Second, Moluccan Muslim–Christian relations remain strong because it is recognized that provocateurs use religion to set Muslims and Christians against each other.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, a solution satisfactory to all Ambonese will be needed, and such a solution will be most promising when existing indigenous *Adat* structures, and especially Pela, are being taken into consideration.<sup>40</sup> Equally important, if not more, are dialogue and open interaction between ethnic-religious groups. Traditions like Pela help to gain mutual trust. Perhaps then, after some reflection, the old village Pela can also be revived and rejuvenated, and Muslims and Christians can agree that some of the old *Adat* may be still viable today and worth rescuing to restore ethnic unity and pride.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, in which he pits the Christians and Muslims against each other, is called into question by the centuries of good relations between Muslims and Christians within Pela in the Moluccas. As an important part of the *Adat*, Pela has been able to achieve harmony, stability, and peace for centuries until war broke out in the Moluccas in 1999. What Moluccan experts thought impossible happened: even Christian and Muslim Pela villages confronted each other. After the signing of the peace treaty in Malino in 2004, the majority of Moluccan Pela Muslims and Christians agreed that embedding religion in the *Adat* structures could prevent new conflict. Dialogue and an open attitude towards each other were important in this regard.

Pela is inclusive and embraces both religious and ethnic diversity, a concept in which the terms recognition, respect, and reconciliation play

Maluku Research University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Honolulu, 16–18 March 1990). See [http://www.nunusaku.com/03\\_publications/articles/blackwhite.html](http://www.nunusaku.com/03_publications/articles/blackwhite.html), accessed 19 October 2022.

39 Elizabeth van Dis, 'Molukse Moslim-Christenrelaties' (MA thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2015), 92.

40 Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine'.

41 Carline Lucassen, 'De oorzaken van etnisch-religieus conflict in Indonesië', *One World*, last modified 1 December 2015, <https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/achtergrond/de-oorzaken-van-etnisch-religieus-conflict-indonesie/>. See also Bartels, 'Your God Is No Longer Mine', 14.

a significant role. Acknowledging (recognition) that there are, in fact, differences is the first step in becoming aware that the other person can be who they are with their own identity and belief, and one should have and show a genuine respect for this. Within the Pela all members are siblings, and ethnic and religious differences are not seen as obstacles but rather as variations of humanity (reconciliation). Pela is important for the Moluccas because the bilateral village alliance after the fratricidal war is still vital enough to be used for restoring Christian–Muslim relations, and it can also have significance for societies where Christians and Muslims share a long history. More widely, in situations where the risk of tension and confrontation is high, hope remains for reducing or even preventing conflict as long as openings for dialogue and mutual respect still exist. And it is here that the Pela model has the potential to serve as a road map to build bridges for peace and stability. Fortunately, the superpowers are still talking and that gives hope of reducing the high tensions. As long as there is dialogue and respect, mutual trust between negotiators and political leaders can be increased, and the risk of regional conflict or even war can be reduced and possibly prevented. The Pela model can serve as a road map to build bridges for peace and stability in the world.

### **About the author**

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# 16 Gender-Related Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices within Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands

*Laura Dijkhuizen and Jack Barentsen*

## Abstract

Inclusive and exclusive practices are part of innovation and changes in religious organizations like churches. In this contribution two cases of change in leadership roles related to gender balance are analysed and discussed. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are explored and interpreted through the lens of a social identity approach and related to the change in authority. Data show that the shift in Bible interpretation on female leadership, as well as the practice of including women in a previously male domain, affected the perception of the church's social and religious identity. In some cases this resulted in leaving the church due to the authority shift, which can be perceived as a form of apostasy.

**Keywords:** evangelical, gender, identity, apostasy, authority

## Introduction

The visibility of female leadership in society has catalysed discussions on the gender roles within the evangelical movement in the Netherlands. This has led to tensions, conflicts, and broken relationships within various Dutch churches that can be helpfully analysed through the lens of change in identity in relation to the concept of apostasy. Female participation in the previously male-only boards of elders and pastors is a discussion that is framed religiously, but with significant (and often unrecognized) cultural and societal dimensions. Church tradition, the authoritative role of the Bible,

and various interpretations of particular texts create a complex process. This discussion about the inclusion of women is not related to competences or calling, although the latter play an important part in problematizing the issue of gender-inclusive leadership. It is related to the way the Bible is perceived to assign different roles to people according to their gender (male and female). The perspective on the authority of the Bible appears to be crucial in these developments and is given a large amount of attention. This shifting of views on authority regarding what is perceived as sacred or, in more general terms, as biblical, could also be interpreted as relating to apostasy when people leave the church because of these changes. However, the denotation as 'not biblical' applies to both sides, which makes a concept such as apostasy more fluid in this process than traditionally described.

This contribution is based on ethnographic research<sup>1</sup> in which we studied two local communities that transitioned from gender-exclusive leadership to a gender-inclusive leadership. The research was conducted in two large churches in the Netherlands which were selected because of a recent process of opening all church offices for female participation.<sup>2</sup> We will explore the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion before, during, and after this process of change; how this affected the perception of the church's socio-religious identity within the leadership; and how a (often implicit) sense of apostasy influenced feelings and behaviours on both sides of the issue. The concept of 'biblical authority' plays a role in each of these concerns.

The analytical framework combines several elements. First, inclusion/exclusion and boundaries are conceptual categories in societal and theological discourses, but also experiential categories of group phenomena, for which a social identity approach offers helpful analytical tools.<sup>3</sup> A social

1 This research is connected to a broader PhD project on gender roles within the Dutch Evangelical Movement conducted by Laura Dijkhuizen. For this specific research project of the Chair 'The Church in the Context of Islam', the authors joined hands. Dijkhuizen conducted the ethnographic part of the research, including the case study descriptions and analysis, and the first full draft of the chapter. Barentsen assisted in the analysis of the material through the lens of social identity theory and in shaping and editing the chapter. This specific chapter was double-blind peer reviewed as well as discussed with participants of the research project of the Chair.

2 The selection of the churches was prepared in the early stages of the broader research and positively assessed by both promoters as well as by the chair of the Church in Context of Islam. More about sampling can be found in the final work of the PhD research.

3 Jack Barentsen, 'Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context', *Journal of Religious Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2015): 49–80. For more information about leadership and social identity, see Alexander S. Haslam, Stephen Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020) and Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity, Key Ideas*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

identity is usually defined as ‘a sense of us’, an individual, internalized sense of belonging to a group.<sup>4</sup> In churches this ‘sense of us’ is also religiously motivated, often creating a strong feeling of belonging, which elsewhere has been labelled as ‘the socio-religious identity’ of a church.<sup>5</sup> Second, an essential part of socio-religious identities is the authority of sacred texts, here biblical authority. Third, a change in socio-religious identity (whether individual or communal) can at times be interpreted as apostasy, a falling away from the true faith. During the analysis, these elements will return for further elaboration.

## Empirical Research

This research has an empirical approach.<sup>6</sup> The two case studies are described using document analysis, creative interviews, and focus groups. Subsequently, social identity theory serves as a heuristic tool to illustrate aspects and processes of identification. The observations are interpreted through the lens of (shifting) authorities in relation to apostasy and the effect on the identity of the congregation.

The two selected churches are well-known in the Netherlands and can be seen as representative of the evangelical movement. The first is

4 Haslam et al., *Psychology of Leadership*, 45–46.

5 Barentsen, ‘Church Leadership’, 53–62.

6 Data was collected and analysed in three stages. First, we described the process of opening all offices in church leadership for women by document analysis, including the minutes of church meetings, letters to the congregation, and policy documents, which resulted in a process timeline for each church. Subsequently, we invited senior leaders to ‘a creative conversation with a focus’ to complete the timeline and to help situate the documents in a fuller understanding of the context. Due to the continuing Covid-19 restrictions, these interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Finally, we organized a focus group meeting with the next level of leaders (‘subleaders’) to understand participant experiences during this process and in the resulting new working relationships. However, developing insights led us to add a fourth stage, to include interviews with people who had been part of the process but for various reasons did not participate in the focus group (having left the church, objecting to Zoom, or simply having missed the first invitation). For more information about the use of creative interviews and focus groups on this research, see Laura Dijkhuizen, ‘A Walk in the Woods: The Role of Focus Groups in Finding Meaning’, *Journal of European Baptist Study*, 21, no. 1 (2021): 67–85.

These focus group conversations and interviews have been transcribed and coded both inductively and by searching deductively for themes related to the process, in/exclusion dynamics, religious identity, and apostasy. Cf. Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, ‘Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (2017): 1–13.



an unaffiliated Evangelical Church (EC); the other a Baptist Church (BC) affiliated with the Dutch Union of Baptist Churches. Both opened all offices to women in 2015 (BC) and 2018 (EC) and granted full cooperation in this research.<sup>7</sup> The following sections describe the churches separately, including the highlights of the process of change in leadership.

### The Evangelical Church

The Evangelical Church is situated in a large city<sup>8</sup> on the edge of the Dutch Bible Belt (a geographical area with large number of conservative, orthodox Protestant churches). In this city more than fifty churches are registered.<sup>9</sup> The church website explains that its beginnings precede World War II as a prayer group for the persecuted Jews. The small house group grew into a church that moved several times within the city due to rapid growth. Recently the church obtained their own building, seating 3,500 worshippers on Sunday mornings. The church has no formal membership, but visitors can register themselves if desired, which makes it complicated to obtain accurate numbers of regular attendees.

The EC can be described as a charismatic-evangelical, non-denominational megachurch.<sup>10</sup> Though formally unaffiliated, it is an influential member of the Dutch Evangelical Alliance. The leadership of the church is multi-layered. A supervisory board works closely with a team of pastors as the leadership team.<sup>11</sup> The church's identity is described in an identity document, revised in 2018. This revision is the result of a process in which the leadership (re)considered several ethical and relational issues. This document is intentionally separated from the statement of beliefs, in which core faith

7 In accordance with standard practices of ethics in research, all data remains confidential with personal and church identities represented anonymously. The data will remain available for the current authors in a secure place for verification and further analysis.

8 Cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants are considered large cities in the Netherlands. 'Lijst van grootste gemeenten in Nederland', Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 13 September 2022, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijst\\_van\\_grootste\\_gemeenten\\_in\\_Nederland](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijst_van_grootste_gemeenten_in_Nederland).

9 According to the website of the city.

10 Paul Vermeer and Peer Scheepers, 'Umbrellas of Conservative Belief: Explaining the Success of Evangelical Congregations in the Netherlands', *Journal of Empirical Theology* 30 (2017): 1–24. Vermeer and Scheepers researched six large, contemporary evangelical churches in the Netherlands and published several articles. The Evangelical Church we observed can be compared to these six churches.

11 These leaders oversee a team of elders and deacons who are each responsible for believers in small groups in a particular geographical area. Together with a cluster of coordinators, the pastors oversee the daily management and the administrative offices in the church and ministries like youth ministry, church services, education, and training.

convictions are described. The church identity shows the characteristics of this specific church in its context.

One of the ethical issues discussed in 2016/17 was female leadership – although it is doubtful whether it is an ethical matter<sup>12</sup> – specifically, can women be elders, pastors, and members of the supervisory board? This topic had been discussed previously, in the early years of this century, and resulted in the formal decision that women could function in the role of deacons and preach in the Sunday services. This did not result in female participation in leadership, which was for some church members and elders unsatisfactory.<sup>13</sup> The interviewees expressed that the fear of going against the will of God by appointing women as elders (which is how the Bible as a strong authoritative voice was interpreted) kept the board, still at that time a board of male elders, from taking this decision.

An external consultant, working at an Evangelical theological institute, assisted the leadership team in studying difficult Bible passages like 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 and answering the question, can women be pastors in the image of Christ?

The outcome of this process is formulated as follows:

It is our belief that difficult passages in the Bible should be interpreted in the context of equality in Christ and should be read as a wise solution within a specific situation. It is our conviction that the woman is appreciated as fully equal to the man, also in leadership positions, which is in coherence with the message of God's Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

These insights were shared with the broader group of elders and the cluster coordinators in the autumn of 2017. Although there was consensus within the leadership team,<sup>15</sup> this was not the case in the wider leadership of the

12 Admitted by one of the pastors in the first round of interviews. In a later stage, this was repeated by a couple who were interviewed because they were leaving the church.

13 As expressed by an elder participant in the focus group meeting. Most participants were not even aware of this previous process, nor were the interviewees who left the church. This means that people were not aware that for more than decade, women were allowed to preach in the Sunday service and become deacons. Up until the more recent process, there had been no female speaker.

14 Consultation document of this church, translated by the authors, as are all the quotations from respondents and interviewees.

15 This leadership team does not work with a majority of votes but with consensus. And although this does not account for the whole community, it matches the way Bevans describes the criteria of community and harmony: Stephen Bevans, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 57–59.

church. A small number of elders were not in agreement with this outcome and left the church, as did some regular visitors. Despite this, the decision was made to admit women in all leadership positions, which has since been formalized in the document about the church's identity.

### The Baptist Church

The Baptist Church started forty years ago in a large city, also in the Dutch Bible Belt. Beginning as a small group, the church grew steadily and divided into two congregations in the early years of this century. Currently, the BC owns a former Roman Catholic church building, seating 650 members on Sundays. The BC is a member of the Baptist Union in the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup>

The leadership structure comprises two part-time pastors and a board of elders as executive body, who lead the church's ministries, with daily management done by one pastor, the board chair, and the board secretary. The congregational meeting, including all adult members, is the final decision-making body of the church (i.e. church government is congregational). Usually the pastors and board provide information and chair the discussion in a congregational meeting before everyone votes, which is binding.

Questions about female leadership arose as early as the 1980s. In the late 1990s, some discussions on the topic took place, but a congregational meeting in which many members attended who had not participated in these discussions voted against women in the leadership structure; these attendees were later referred to as the 'uninformed voter'. Between 2012 and 2015 a new process started with three Bible study evenings conducted by two theologians. Subsequently the board appointed an advisory committee<sup>17</sup> that brought out a report presenting both sides of the issue: opening all leadership positions to women (specifically those of preacher, elder, pastor) or maintaining current restrictions (a woman may preach but not become elder or pastor).

The report was discussed in a congregational meeting, and another Bible study evening was organized with a presenter who favoured maintaining

16 For a short introduction see Miranda Klaver, 'We Are the World? Identity Politics and Congregational Transformation of Dutch Baptists', *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2012): 420–30.

17 This committee existed as five men and five women; the personal positions on the issue were not known by the board beforehand. The committee met over seven evenings between September 2013 and April 2014 and did regular bible study together. The chair of this committee, a woman, was part of the initial interview to verify the process.

the restrictive policy.<sup>18</sup> In the next meeting there was no quorum, so the vote was deferred to another congregational meeting in January 2015, where the majority adopted the open policy. Leaders had urged members to participate in the discussions before deciding, yet the outcome was a close vote.<sup>19</sup>

When people applauded this outcome, the attending interim pastor cautioned that the church was quite divided on the matter and organized an evening with those who had voted for the restrictive policy. This evening focused on the centrality of Christ, which did not change the diversity in interpretation but supported people to combine a personal (conservative) point of view with diversity in the church. At that time, as far as the leaders are aware, no one left the church due to the opening of all offices to women.

### A Social Identity Approach

Social identity,<sup>20</sup> as originally defined, refers to ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’.<sup>21</sup> In later literature this is elaborated as the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of social identity.<sup>22</sup> These dimensions help to unravel the dynamics of in/exclusion of the churches described above, since the issue at hand turns out to be identity-sensitive. The cognitive dimension relates to the perception of similarities with group members and the differences from others. In a church setting, members focus on common beliefs and practices as *distinct* from the beliefs and practices of others, such as other religions and non-religious groups and organizations. The affective dimension points to the emotional bond, a sense of belonging to the group

18 One of the first two biblical scholars, a theologian, unexpectedly turned out to favour the open policy, while in the earlier process, this person had still held the position against female leadership. This resulted in a third evening with a more conservative facilitator. One person, who was against women in leadership, changed his mind during this evening and turned to favour female leadership. The reason for this change of view was given as being poor substantiation for the position against women in leadership.

19 To change the statutes, a two-thirds majority of the votes is needed, and this requirement was narrowly met.

20 See also Chapter 4 of this volume.

21 Henry Tajfel, *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1978), 63.

22 Daniel Belanche, Luis V. Casalo, and Carlos Flavián, ‘Understanding the Cognitive, Affective and Evaluative Components of Social Urban Identity: Determinants, Measurement, and Practical Consequences’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 50 (2017): 138–53.

(such as feelings of security or estrangement). In the case study, the issue at hand led to feelings of bonding, but also of anger, insecurity, and anxiety over perceived changes in socio-religious identity. The evaluative dimension indicates the value of the group in social interaction and for self-esteem. The case study demonstrates how this issue impacts the value of the church for religious self-identification as well as for relationships with society. These three dimensions are related to the content or elements of identity: values, beliefs, practices, norms, and so forth. This case study shows that the question of male and female leadership often functions as an identity marker for people on both sides of the issue. Other issues are less identity-sensitive and thus generate less tension and conflict.<sup>23</sup> Finally, some group members tend to represent and embody the values and beliefs of their group better than others; these so-called prototypical members often have significant influence and emerge in (or fill positions of) leadership.<sup>24</sup> This 'representation' or 'embodiment' is not static but shifts over time as churches respond to various issues, with individual members moving (whether intentionally or not) between the margins and centre of the group.<sup>25</sup>

### Processes of Social and Religious Identification in the Evangelical Church

The study of the Evangelical Church demonstrates that the three dimensions of social identity are clearly visible in this case. Examining the interview with the key facilitators of the process and the focus group data, one might conclude that the cognitive dimension manifested a smooth transition to a more inclusive policy, which resulted in emotions that aligned with the process. Most participants found this new policy valuable, although some needed time to adjust.<sup>26</sup>

However, the focus group data also indicates exclusionary mechanisms, since some women felt excluded before the policy change. One of the

23 Blake E. Ashforth, Spencer H. Harrison, and Kevin G. Corley, 'Identification in Organizations: An Examination of Four Fundamental Questions', *Journal of Management* 34, no. 3 (2008): 325–74.

24 See Haslam et al., *Psychology of Leadership*, ch. 4, 'Being One of Us: Leaders as In-Group Prototypes', 71–100.

25 Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, vol. 168 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 58–63.

26 This contribution does not offer a lengthy report of all the data but focuses on the aspects concerning the inclusion/exclusion dynamics. However, the data of this ethnographic research will be used in other articles presenting Dijkhuizen's broader research.

participants shared the following anecdote: Her husband had been called to pray for a sick woman and anoint her with oil. This elder asked another brother to join him in the ministry. He also asked his wife to accompany them, since the sick person was female. However, she was not allowed to pray or to anoint. Agitated she exclaimed, 'I could come along as what? Wallpaper? Really, that is how I experienced it!'

This situation exemplifies the intricate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The elder's wife was both included *and* excluded because she was female: this gave her a 'natural' connection with the sick woman, while it prevented her from exercising formal religious authority. Remarkably, inclusion and exclusion operate simultaneously in the same situation and even regarding the same person.

Women like this focus group participant were passionate to serve next to their husband-elder (affective dimension), but they missed the 'official' backing from the leadership of the board (cognitive).<sup>27</sup> They were always seen as 'the wife of' so that some people visited asked, 'Why is the elder or pastor not visiting me?' – which was experienced as hurtful by these women (evaluative). At some point these women were ordained equally to their husbands, which gave these women the sense of being included and affirmed in their role as leader (evaluative). However, other women, some of whom participated in the focus group, were satisfied with the status quo before the policy change (all three dimensions), occasionally wondering if the other female participants had not been 'too eager to become visible' in choosing to be ordained.<sup>28</sup>

Additional interview data also provide a different perspective, deviating from the general trend. For instance, some felt excluded and left the church. We interviewed one couple; the husband was an elder with his wife's full support. They noticed a change in the church's theology and culture but passionately objected that if God wants the man to be the head of the woman, 'who are we to argue?' (cognitive and emotional dimension). They saw people leaving with whom they connected well (evaluative dimension).

27 Cf. Anne-Claire Mulder, 'Religious Authority, Religious Leadership, or Leadership of a Religious Organisation – Same Difference? An Effort in Clarification', *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* (2016): 133–54 (pp. 145–47).

28 Dijkhuizen wrote a column about female leadership and the impact of sexism and lack of support from other women. This prevents some women from stepping forward. Laura Dijkhuizen, *Wat voorgangers (m/v) kunnen leren van onze vrouwen in het voetbal* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Wij, 2021), <https://www.nieuwwij.nl/opinie/wat-voorgangers-v-m-kunnen-leren-van-onze-vrouwen-in-het-voetbal/>. See also Laura Dijkhuizen, 'Rolverdeling M/V is Seksistisch', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 4 October 2021, 11.

He faithfully served another four-year term as elder with her support (affective and evaluative dimension), after which they decided to leave the church.<sup>29</sup> Although they spoke positively about the process and the church leaders, they gradually moved toward the group boundary, compelled by their convictions and by the leaders' decisions. A sense of estrangement progressively overtook their earlier feelings of belonging.

Another interviewee, a former elder and lecturer in the church, was very emotional, even though he had left four years ago. This elder experienced the advisor as someone who infiltrated and did not trust the process at all. In his words, 'There was no process!' This person felt unheard, uninvolved, and that his honour was attacked (evaluative) due to the convictions that he held as a matter of integrity (cognitive). 'You can feel alone in a community of 5,000 people.' The transition of being included as an elder, preacher, and lecturer to feeling excluded because of the policy change led to his evaluation, 'I cannot stay here anymore.' All dimensions of identification turned negative, and he formally announced his withdrawal the very day that the first woman was appointed as elder. The group boundary had been moved, excluding him and his convictions. His formal withdrawal was not just an act of self-exclusion, but, in his opinion, it was also effected by the exclusion he felt others imposed upon him.

Several people left the church, but since there is no membership structure, it is difficult to say how many and for what reasons. Several interviewees mentioned that the core of the church is currently more diffuse. Some people moved to the edge, started new groups, or stayed away. The senior leaders we initially interviewed acknowledged this and saw this as unavoidable in such a large church. They realized that they had both explicitly and implicitly moved identity boundaries and that marginalization or exclusion would be the inevitable result for some. The aforementioned elder expressed it in this way: 'This is the decision, take it or leave it.'

This clearly demonstrates that the relatively smooth process as described in the first interview with the senior leaders, and as mostly affirmed by focus group participants, represents the majority perspective, suggesting that the policy change affirmed the church's identity and inclusion. However, minority voices represent an opposite point of view, with clear feelings of exclusion and loss of value of the church's identity in their experience.

In general, authority is an important factor in shaping the identity of an organization, or in this case, the church. In social identity theory, this is

29 At the moment of the interview, the couple were in the process of leaving, so this was still very fresh.

reflected by the role of prototypical group members, as mentioned above. Hence, the practice of and responses to authority provide significant indications of social identification. However, authority is shifting<sup>30</sup> and can be divided into institutional authority, meaning someone is in authority because of their position, or relational authority, meaning someone is an authority because trust is granted to this person or to a particular text.<sup>31</sup> In the words of Dr. Anne-Claire Mulder, lecturer in women and gender studies,

Religious authority is attributed to someone whose words or ideas are experienced as meaningful and valuable by someone else. In this case it concerns her or his 'speaking of God', or her or his words or ideas about the absolute or ultimate of human existence. This process of attributing religious authority to her or his words and ideas places her or him in the position of religious authority, makes her or him a religious authority, someone turned to for advice when needing to judge a situation in light of the religious tradition. This means that religious authority is dynamic and not fixed, circulating and not limited to (persons in) certain positions or to the ordained.<sup>32</sup>

The aforementioned prototype or identity figures can be seen as someone who, from a relational point of view, has been granted authority because the ideas and words align with that of the group.

The organizational structure in the Evangelical Church changed from congregational, with a board of male participants ('broederraad', board of brothers), to a more episcopal (hierarchical) model with a supervisory board (males leading and deciding, their wives participating in the discussion) and a team of pastors. This leadership team makes all major decisions and policies, which works well for the majority in this large church, but some (former) 'members' felt particularly excluded because of this change to 'top-down' leadership.

The theologian-advisor who consulted with the leadership team in their vision to develop the church did appear to function as an identification figure in this process.<sup>33</sup> The advisor guided meetings at several levels

30 Jack Barentsen, 'Church Leadership'; Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, eds., *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016), 1–24.

31 Mulder, 'Religious Authority', 133–54.

32 Mulder, 'Religious Authority', 140.

33 One of the leading pastors at that time, a nationally known preacher and identification figure within the Dutch charismatic movement, did not participate in the church's process concerning



within the broader leadership team and the congregation on the topic of female inclusion in leadership, and he played a significant role in the church's changed leadership vision. Because of the advisor's long-term relationship with this church, his position on the matter was clear, and some even attributed the tensions they felt over this change to the advisor's influence, blaming him for feeling excluded.<sup>34</sup>

Several church documents functioned as authoritative. The church identity document defined the church's position on 'ethical' issues. After debate, a revised version included an affirming position on female leadership. This document represents the consensus of the larger leadership team, although not necessarily of the whole church, and hence functions as an extension of the authority of this team.<sup>35</sup> The two senior pastors were aware that this change from informal tradition to a formalized identity document was experienced as 'a wall' by some members. Its definitive character encouraged taking a position either 'for' or 'against' female leadership.<sup>36</sup> This parallels a statement by the elder who left: 'If you write down too much on paper, it will be very narrow. If you don't put too much on paper, the Bible is your guide.' He framed this document as an authority that became a threat to the authority of the Bible. Although the leadership team made efforts to distinguish between the identity document as local policy versus the statement of faith as authoritative core conviction, this distinction apparently did not resonate with this former elder. Several others, though, mentioned that they found this distinction helpful, since it separated a position on female leadership from 'the heart of the Gospel'. As one female focus group participant said, 'What I like about the whole treatment of those ethical themes was that we did make a distinction

female leadership, although he expressed being in favour of it. Research participants did not mention him as leading 'top-down' on this issue, nor as an identity figure for this process. At the time of this research, this pastor was no longer part of the leadership team due to other activities. When responding to an email inviting him to participate in this research, he expressed that he felt it is 'very important research' but that he had no time to participate. He also mentioned that he 'advocates more equality on the platform for women and men' (email 11 November 2020).

34 Cf. Mulder, 'Religious Authority', 138. On being willing to receive criticism when granted authority.

35 Of interest in the matter of validating text as authority is the work of Claudia V. Camp, 'Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew Scripture', in *Embodied Love, Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula M. Coe, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1987), 97–113. Also discussed in Mulder, 'Religious Authority'. In short, to assign authority to a document or the Bible means that a choice must be made, again and again, to be corrected, guided, and persuaded by this authority. It is an act of the will, a free choice.

36 See Chapter 2 of this volume by Dr. Dirk-Martin Grube, where he explains the idea of bivalence, truth or falsity, as religious exclusivism. We believe this mechanism also works for the more conservative way of thinking about female leadership in the Evangelical churches.

between creed and ecclesiastical identity. I heard the advisor say it so well: “this is not a matter of life and death”,<sup>37</sup> In the light of the concept of apostasy, this is an important observation since it is exactly this essential which causes division in the church and the claims of being ‘unbiblical’.

Two other important authorities are the Bible and tradition. Bible study, part of the DNA of the church, has been at the heart of the process. Yet religious and cultural traditions play a significant role. According to one of the pastors, ‘There is an enormous need for clarity and certainty in roles. People often think very stereotypically in role patterns in families.’ Both leaders interviewed think that these patterns are deeply ingrained in the Dutch Bible Belt, with its conservative culture. Changes in this pattern are strongly resisted because of a traditional fear of ‘worldliness’, while obedience to the Bible is seen as adhering to these patterns. This cultural embedment can be recognized in focus group data, such as several women who ‘warned’ the leadership team not to become ‘a feminine church’ or other women who gladly accepted a supportive role towards their husband.

These few comments indicate the complexity of how group identity and authority interact. In this church, authority is shaped in leadership structure through the influence of particular persons in leadership roles, in documents and their relative importance, in core group values such as obedience to the Bible as the highest authority, and in the maintenance of particular (conservative) lifestyles. The case can be interpreted as a delicate dance with all these elements of authority, seeking alignment and congruence in shaping group and personal identity. When alignment seemed beyond reach, often because of individual perspectives, people chose to leave, since they could no longer identify sufficiently with the church. This broke intense emotional attachments, which is at times reflected in strong sentiments towards certain authorities. For these people, the new ways of interpreting Scripture, a contextualized approach, seemed to contrast with their view on biblical authority, which can be described as a more literal approach. This connects these observations to our discussion on apostasy.

### **Processes of Social and Religious Identification in the Baptist Church**

The process in the Baptist Church offers additional insights which arose from what was at the time the group identity and experienced way of executing

37 This distinction appears implicitly in most churches that discuss female leadership; a more focused discussion on female leadership, essential or non-essential in relation to the Gospel, can be expected in forthcoming articles.

authority. The focus group session<sup>38</sup> revealed that several factors prevented the participants from engaging in open conversation during the process concerning female leadership. In addition to group size and time pressure, these factors related to felt pressure to be 'biblical' (cognitive dimension), reluctance to share personal and emotional aspects (affective), anxiety based on prior experiences with such discussions elsewhere (evaluative), and sometimes an undefined sense of a lack of safety (affective, evaluative).

Specifically, the focus on 'what does the Bible say, and shouldn't we stick to it?' made the conversation more complicated, according to one participant (cognitive). Yet this is consistent with the approach taken during the Bible studies in the advisory committee and the congregational meetings, which focused mostly on biblical interpretation of key passages and how they supported one of the two options (open or restrictive policy, cognitive dimension). It is a specific way in which this congregation honoured their commitment to biblical obedience as a main identity marker. On the other hand, such a strong focus on taking the right 'biblical' position may also have created the 'uninformed voter' in an earlier process, where members abstained from the discussion and simply voted to maintain their conservative identity and block change on this issue (affective, evaluative).

In a separate interview, the female elder attributed these phenomena to the 'business' character of the early meetings (cognitive); she commented several times that she did not feel safe to speak her mind within the culture of the male leadership of the board (affective). This style grew more relational with the arrival of two female elders (including herself) and a younger generation of leaders, allowing discussions, even in formal church meetings, to become more open (affective). Apparently, female members were better able to identify with and participate in the congregational processes of deliberation after the adoption of the open policy, because there were women in leadership roles and a resulting change in leadership style (possibly evaluative dimension).

Still, the leadership culture did not change overnight. Some women in their sixties, who were in favour of female leadership (evaluative), do not participate in leadership because of remaining doubts about whether the open policy is biblical (cognitive) and the concern that this openness

38 It was difficult to recruit focus group participants, with late registrations, even later cancellations, and some personal doubts about whether they qualified as (sub)leader of the church. For at least one person (a female elder), the online format did not offer the safety for such a conversation. We decided to interview this female elder as well as the former (interim) pastor separately.

might result in the much-feared slippery slope and a slide away from 'being biblical' (cognitive).<sup>39</sup> The search for the 'right' biblical stance is challenging (cognitive). As the youth worker said during the focus group, 'Can you form your own opinion in which sometimes two truths coexist, and can we just say, "we don't know" and both things could be possible?' (cognitive and evaluative).

In this case much of the formal interaction took place over the cognitive dimension of their religious identity – that is, about how to be biblical, Baptist, and congregational – when handling such a change in policy. The very strong connection between a particular position and an understanding of 'being biblical' turned this change into an identity issue that could only be negotiated with difficulty. This is clear from the emotional undertones of fear, anxiety, and lack of safety that appear to have motivated people's participation without being explicitly addressed, and these concern the affective dimension of social identity. The process also clearly manifests the value of unity, of continuing together as a church despite significant differences. The interim pastor's response to the applause and his emphasis on the centrality of Christ marks the evaluative dimension of the church's identity.

In a congregational church, all believers (although only members can vote) together form the final authority in all matters through a process of 'communal discernment'.<sup>40</sup> Yet focus group data show that such discussions often begin within the board of elders, which then guides the congregation, so that congregational and board authority interact to shape the direction and identity of the church. This might indicate that the granted authority (congregational meeting) can be overruled by the ruling authorities (board).

The (interim) pastor played a significant role as identification figure in this process. With the thought that the no-voters could keep the church on track with their wisdom ('The direction of the majority with the wisdom of the minority'), he was instrumental in helping the church stay together without a split. In a special evening, he did not focus on changing convictions but on unity amidst difference. In a separate interview, this pastor reported focusing on Christ as the centre, while stating plainly that he considered

39 The church's recent process of thinking through their position on homosexuality highlighted such fears. This was still fresh in the minds of all focus group participants and provided clarification in hindsight. Members who hesitated or voted against female leadership spoke their minds about the slippery slope the church had embarked on.

40 Communal discernment expresses the Baptist conviction that the Holy Spirit works through the whole congregation to discern God's will. See, James W. McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 479 and Bevans, *Essays*, 57–59.

female church leadership as 'unbiblical' based on specific texts. However, he also expressed that this would not prevent him from working with women. In this way, he became an identification figure for those who objected to female leadership and embodied the way that one could remain in the church without having to change one's convictions. This created the unique situation in which he was granted authority in relational spheres but was also able to act because of his position.<sup>41</sup>

The way the Bible is seen as authority was transformed by the approach of biblical hermeneutics. This pastor recognized the restrictive position in certain biblical passages but also the greater openness towards female leadership throughout the whole Bible. He placed this tension in the context of the unity of the church with Christ as centre, thereby enabling conservative members to maintain their trust in being 'biblical' while cooperating with other members who interpreted the Bible differently but also believed in being 'biblical'. The identity marker of 'being biblical' remained firmly in place, even while creating room for different interpretations. In this he used a narrative approach: 'We already give women authority when there is no capable man around', using examples from the Bible and missions. This resonated with this congregation's experience, since women could participate in some roles<sup>42</sup> when there was a lack of capable male elders. In this way, the need led to a pragmatic solution which, at that time, prevented people from leaving the church.

Focus group participants also acknowledged the changing role of biblical authority. The various Bible study sessions in this process had helped them to consider the context of biblical texts more than isolated verses. They began to value the Bible as authority in a more narrative way,<sup>43</sup> less shaped by a few individual sentences. To some extent the Bible's authoritative role was already reshaped because of the contextual hermeneutical approach of the 'Bible Teacher',<sup>44</sup> who was a well-respected member in the church and an acknowledged theologian in Baptist circles. The change in understanding biblical authority was thus also connected to this Bible teacher as an identification figure.

41 Mulder, 'Religious Authority', 135–38.

42 For example, in roles such as leader of the church service, which is a different role from worship leader or preacher – in Dutch 'liturg' or 'eredienstleider', meaning the one who opens the service, does the announcements, introduces the speaker of the day, prays for them, and closes the service.

43 Cf. Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Narrative Approaches', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), 214–23.

44 The words of one of the interviewees.

A remarkable shift in authority took place in the actions of the chairman of the first board to include women. This male leader was strongly against female leadership, but when the congregation voted for the open policy, he aligned himself and encouraged the first two female elders to step into their authority. In this way, he expressed his belief that God had directed the congregation in this policy change, while implicitly acknowledging that formal church authority must safeguard church identity.

Another shift in authority is in the role of society and its values. For instance, one focus group participant reported that his opinion on female leadership shifted 180 degrees because of his work situation, where women served in leadership roles. This affected his view on biblical texts before the whole process started, and he 'impatiently waited to see it changed [in the church]'. Societal changes led him to a different hermeneutical approach while the church at that time used a more normative approach. He had not joined the board because of his views on female leadership, but later his wife was one of the first female elders. Conversely, the youth worker in the focus group reflected on the dominant role of society as an authority in opposition to biblical truths: 'There are social themes that enter the church. Yes, that rubs, and both ways, so to speak.' So despite a general caution, if not fear, of adopting 'worldly values', societal norms and values also affect the notion of what is 'biblical' and what is not, and in this way functions as a form of authority in the lives of these church members.

In this case several identification figures gave the congregation a feeling of safety (we are still a biblical church) and belonging (we do not have to agree in order to be one). This created space for the members to explore the way the Bible functioned as authority: no longer in a doctrinal way where individual, isolated verses could be interpreted as universal principle, but through a more narrative hermeneutic where Jesus as central figure helped the congregation to choose a direction. They accepted that they did not all agree on the matter of female leadership and embraced a more open approach as the way of discerning guidance.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that to initiate change within a local church, both time and a safe space are essential. In these two processes, the authority of the Bible is not questioned, but the way this authority is interpreted and experienced shifted. In this process all figures of identification play a crucial role, implicit and sometimes explicit.

When we zoom in on the in/exclusion dynamics, the observations show that people left both churches, immediately or after some time,<sup>45</sup> because of the change in policy on women in leadership. The people who left referred to the decisions as unbiblical, which can be regarded as a form of reversed apostasy. They felt excluded and saw themselves as true believers; to them, the ones who stayed were the apostates.

This process is closely related to how people perceived the authority of the Bible and of various identity figures. It is likely, in our interpretation, that those who did not feel heard and left did not do so simply because of a difference of opinion, even if some people clearly signalled that their conviction was so important that a change in policy would cause them to leave. Rather, this change of policy represented a crossing of identity boundaries to them, with an illegitimate interpretation of the Bible and hence a violation of the authority of the Bible. Even the authority of an identity figure was not enough to persuade these people to join the rest across this boundary. Although no one used the term 'apostasy' to describe or defend their leaving, it was implicit that their sense of what counted as apostasy prevented them from crossing this boundary.

Additionally, whether people feel included or excluded is not an objective given but a personal and social evaluation relative to one's degree of identification with the group and its many practices and activities. That is, some people felt included in the process, while (a few?) others did not. This was due, in part, to different evaluations of how a particular opinion in the debate related to the church's identity and one's own sense of belonging to the community.

Another aspect of the in/exclusion dynamic becomes visible in both focus groups, where women exchanged experiences of feeling excluded before they were officially admitted to and acknowledged in leadership roles. In the BC it was not possible to be an elder before the policy change, while in the EC the wives of elders were included in the deliberations of leadership. Yet, even *this* inclusion was a struggle, as one of the female EC focus group participants expressed in an email after a recent confrontation with a male colleague: 'It was a tough conversation in which he even indicated that he did not see us as equal. I nearly fell off my chair!' Women are not always accepted as equal in collegial conversations by an older generation or in situations where they represent formal church authority. After the policy change, even though they were continuing some of the same activities, their

45 In the BC people left during the process on homosexuality (footnote 38), referring to the earlier discussion on female leadership.

confirmation as elder or board member attributed leadership status and value to these activities, which made these women feel more secure in their role. Several experienced the act of ordination as elder to be affirmative of their authority and a legitimization of being part of the church's leadership; at the same time, it is seen as a confirmation of their personal calling.<sup>46</sup>

These social identity processes can be interpreted not just as attempts to change policy or persuade people to a particular conviction but as long-term leadership processes to create safe spaces that would enable the community to experiment with new insights and emotional attachments while maintaining the value of belonging to the community. These insights are generated by including recent narratives of personal experiences with female leadership and (new) emotions attached to these experiences during the overall process of deliberation. New insights are also generated in attempts to renew one's reading and understanding of Scripture by reinterpreting key texts or by assigning different priority to various texts on both sides of the debate. The latter seems to have been the primary emphasis in the BC, while the EC also included the former.

One might analyse this debate as a series of efforts to discover a new balance between various sources of authority. The traditional perspective is supported by a history of male leadership and reading biblical texts as supportive of that practice. Overall, people's experiences with leadership were oriented towards male leadership. In addition, patterns of male leadership were thought to conform to nature. Hence, leadership structure, scripture, tradition, and contemporary experience all aligned to support male leadership. When societal leadership structures changed, which in turn changed people's experience of leadership, this caused a renewed search in scripture and tradition to see how a different balance of authorities could be achieved. Some evangelical churches opt to deny the legitimacy of current experiences with female leadership to maintain the traditional male leadership structure. Other churches apply a different hermeneutical key and, in doing so, open doors for more inclusive leadership structures.

Notable at a theological level is the effort to emphasize, in both churches, though in different ways, that female leadership is not part of the core or heart of the gospel. In many conservative churches, even this proposal is rejected, not so much because it is considered 'gospel' but because a belief

46 Cf. Mulder, 'Religious Authority', 145, 147. On the one hand, ordination can be seen as the authorization of the leader (145), but, on the other hand, it is also the confirmation of a calling (147). In our conversations we noted that these women used both ways to describe the effects after the ordination.



in the different aspects of the creation of man and woman is seen as non-negotiable to maintain a high view of scripture.<sup>47</sup> The willingness to move the debate about female leadership away from a matter of biblical authority in a normative way is an important leadership strategy to disconnect it from the church's core beliefs, and thus to avoid the burden of apostasy. This enables leaders to create the safe space needed for further interaction. It provides room to manoeuvre while maintaining the group identity. In the BC the leaders shifted towards a contextual hermeneutical view of scriptural interpretation, which allowed them to assure the congregation that they were still a 'biblical' church despite differences. This moved the church away from a form of apostasy and subsequent policy so that members would not be obliged to leave over this. In the EC the feelings of inclusion were mostly influenced by the leadership structure and a few identification figures. The process focused on bringing consensus in favour of a policy change in increasing circles of leaders, merely informing the congregation once a decision had been reached. Thus, it mattered greatly in which circle of leadership one found oneself and whether one wanted to move along to an open policy. Here being 'biblical' was defined by the leadership team beforehand in the broader sense. However, the outcome for women in leadership affirms that the churches see this as biblical at the moment, which implies it is seen as the contextual, hermeneutical way forward. Most focus group participants mentioned at certain points that they cannot understand how this can be seen otherwise, referring, for example, to the way Jesus interacted with women or to the fact that Paul mentions women as co-workers in his letters. This can be seen as an implicit way to see the people leaving as unbiblical, shedding a different light on the concept of apostasy in current inclusion/exclusion processes.

We started this chapter with the question of how the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion before, during, and after a process of change affect the perception of the church's socio-religious identity within the leadership; we asked how an (often implicit) sense of apostasy influenced feelings and behaviours on both sides of the issue. We may conclude that these dynamics form a complex combination of personal, institutional, and convictional factors. On a personal level, individuals need to negotiate the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of social identity to arrive at a sense of identification; otherwise, disidentification will be unavoidable. At the institutional level, we have seen the influence of agents of authority and how

47 Cf. Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021).

the perception of various sources of authorities can shift in a search for an enduring balance that promises stability and cohesion for the group. Leaders and other identification figures play an important role in inclusion and exclusion processes at the institutional level. At the convictional level, leaders attempted to create safe spaces to allow individuals to experiment with new Bible reading strategies and new convictions. In some cases they were able to use their granted authority to enable people to adapt or change their personal convictions. Positively, these identity figures were able to manoeuvre the debate away from the notion of apostasy. Negatively, a strong identification figure could also be experienced as so dominant that people opted for (self-) exclusion. In the cases investigated, this was an exception and not the general response. Although all interviewees insisted on the importance of the Bible as authority, we can conclude that a more narrative hermeneutical approach changed the way the Bible was experienced as authoritative. This does not mean that convictions changed automatically, but it was a way to move from a propositional approach, in which a bivalent true/false paradigm shaped the discussions with its tendency to lead to polarization, to a more narrative approach, where differences could be explored, negotiated, and tolerated.

We discovered that the concept of apostasy is present but complex. It is fluid and can be applied to more than one group. The term 'unbiblical' is used by people who left the church but also in the focus groups with the current leaders. Thus, the present research justifies its ethnographic approach, which can be seen as a way 'to challenge and complexify situations and accepted views of the nature of truth and reality and, in so doing, "to render the familiar strange".'<sup>48</sup>

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48 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 158.



# 17 Religious Exclusivism, Social Inclusion: Missiological Reflections

*Dorottya Nagy*

## Abstract

Based on the material of this volume, the present chapter examines the ‘so what?’ question central for reflections. By doing so, it proposes two major areas for further attention and research: 1) theology and people of other faiths/ideologies (apostasy) and 2) theological engagement with social exclusion, especially through the notion of loneliness (intergenerationality, immigration, and internetization). The chapter argues that in order to look afresh at the ‘theologically exclusive–socially inclusive’ pairing, a contextual approach to practices of exclusion and inclusion is needed. It also reminds the reader that the tension inherent to the religious exclusivism–social inclusion divide invites any Christian theological reflection to dwell on the notion of sin to which practices of exclusion and inclusion relate.

**Keywords:** theology-missiology, exclusion, inclusion, religious other, loneliness

To what extent is it possible to be exclusive in one’s own theological/religious convictions yet be socially inclusive?

The organizers of the research project, from which the various contributions to this volume emerged, expanded on this central question with a set of questions such as: Who belongs or does not belong to a Christian community? Who sets the criteria for belonging? How do we relate to people who leave the community because of a fundamental shift in their understanding of what the faith of the community, both in terms of ethics and dogmatics, should be? How do we relate as Christian communities to people and communities of other faiths (especially the non-Christian other)

within a multireligious society?<sup>1</sup> These questions, linked to the lived realities of Christian communities, touch upon the issues of Christian identity and belonging. The initiators of the research project, by taking an entry point through the notion of ‘apostasy’ and with reference to reading biblical texts such as Deuteronomy 17, explicitly formulated a tension between how theological/religious exclusivity relates to social-societal inclusivity.

After listening to manifold voices and different accords in the richness of arguments and ideas addressing this question in the present volume, I offer my text as a postlude. I invite the reader to ‘stay seated’, endure with me for a few more pages, and reflect on the ‘so what?’ question. We have listened to many perspectives and have seen various disciplinary approaches. What are possible routes to take for further research? Precisely this is the task of a postlude and precisely this is the modest aim of this contribution. It makes the senses once again reflect on what has been researched together. It also takes the ‘worshipping’ community back into the context of the daily happenings, into practising what has been preached.

Making the ‘so what?’ question the main concern of this contribution implies that the structure of the chapter is defined by the order in which I identify issues which need further attention and research. I will first highlight the object behind the exclusion–inclusion pairing (section one) and, closely linked to it, I formulate the need for further research on the interests in practices of exclusion and inclusion (section two). I then propose further interdisciplinary work on the notion of boundaries (section three). The next call for research is to link the discourses of this volume to the concrete socio-political and religious-cultural context identified as the Netherlands and wider Europe (section four). I identify two main sites for research. The first one is theology and people of other faiths or ideologies. I illustrate my proposal with contextual reflections on apostasy. The second area I propose is theological engagement with social exclusion, especially through the notion of loneliness; I put forward intergenerationality, immigration, and internetization as keywords. I conclude the chapter by offering a variation on the leading question about the complicity of Christian identities in practices of exclusion (section five). Together with identifying these two areas for further engagement, I confirm the signal repeatedly present in this volume: that new theological terminology and grammar is needed when conversing about exclusion and inclusion.

I conduct this postlude with the note that theology missiology is a conscious and reflective study of Christian identities and patterns of

1 Email correspondence with Bernhard Reitsma, 9 March 2021.

identification in their manifold appearances and performances in time and space and, above all, social inter-relatedness.

### **Who Is and Who Are the Objects of the Theological Exclusion— Social Inclusion Divide?**

The grammar of the leading question calls for answering the question from the perspective of a faith- or God-confessing human being in their relation to other human beings and different types of communities. Can I be exclusive in my 'convictions' and yet 'socially inclusive'? The question leaves open the object of exclusion yet the reference to social inclusion makes clear that in all cases it is about human beings dealing with other human beings, or at least ideas and deeds related to other human beings, based on a particular and explicit understanding of God (theological convictions). The 'dealing with' happens both individually and institutionally.

Formulating the question in this way invites further reflection when applying it to concrete situations. What kind of statements will I then get? Possible ones might include the following: I hate sin, yet I love the sinners because I believe God does the same. I don't allow women to be ordained, yet I ask them to teach children, because I believe God has a clear message on gender issues. I don't pray together with Muslims because I don't believe we pray to the same God, yet I welcome them for dinner because I am to practice hospitality. I don't believe that people who do not confess Christ as their Saviour will be saved, because this is how I read my Bible, yet I set up charity work for the homeless and do so together with people from other confessions because I believe we need to serve the needy. I don't invite the Roman Catholic visitor to my church to celebrate the Lord's Supper together with my confessing community, yet I cordially invite them for coffee after the service. I can't attend the wedding of the two men in my street because the Bible is clear about homosexuality, yet I help them in building their house when they ask for my expertise as a carpenter. I don't kill the Native Americans, yet I try to integrate them into 'our' society.

The exercise performed above reveals the tricky and ambiguous nature of the tension between being theologically exclusive and trying to be (come) socially inclusive. Attention to the notion of sin and its relation to exclusion and inclusion pops up throughout this volume. So far, the exercise above follows the individual and personal forms of questioning. Yet it is obvious from the context of the question that the question has at least three more dimensions. The first one asks to what extent a confessing community can be

theologically exclusive and yet socially inclusive; this question implies that exclusive beliefs<sup>2</sup> create situations which lead to the exclusion of persons who wish to belong. Putting it into an example, we might ask: Can a teenage single mother remain in a community that forbids sexual intercourse before marriage? How long and under what conditions? Does the environment of the Christian community count as a place where social inclusion can be practised? Social pressure as embodiment of exclusive beliefs results in abandonment.<sup>3</sup> A second question might be: Can a community be theologically exclusive yet socially inclusive when it comes to a collective/community as a collective/community? Church history provides us with countless examples of excommunication and exclusion in this respect.<sup>4</sup> The third one is about the participation of a theologically exclusive community in public life advocating for social inclusion. The question regarding this is: To what extent and in what ways can Christian communities which confess that there is no salvation but in Christ partake in programmes of social inclusion in public life at large (church/world division)?

The tension between being theologically exclusive yet socially inclusive seems to be negotiable as long as it remains abstract, for example, in theological statements such as 'God loves the sinners but condemns sin.' Within situations which evoke this abstraction, the separation between sin and sinner is usually not that obvious. Beliefs become tested in 'real' life. Because beliefs translate to and have consequences in 'real' life, ethical issues are usually the best illustrations to challenge the tension between being theologically exclusive and socially inclusive. For example, if female ordination based on a biblical hermeneutics is considered to be sin, a woman who experiences vocation cannot be ordained within the community that considers her vocation a sinful desire or aspiration. The examples provided above thus keep interrogating the possibility of maintaining the tension in question.

To the 'so what?' question of these arguments belongs a call to investigate how research and praxis conceive both of theological exclusivism and social inclusivism. What has the notion of sin to do with these discussions? These questions then also ask what other terms there might be through which positionality in relationships can be described, researched, and analysed.

2 All beliefs perceived through the conservative–liberal dichotomy and spectrum may be identified as exclusivist.

3 Jessica Lindblom, 'A Radical Reassessment of the Body in Social Cognition', *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): art. 987, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00987>.

4 Scott Waugh and Peter D. Diehl, *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

What are the counter-concepts of theological exclusivism? Researching Christianity worldwide has long demonstrated that to evoke theories of theological inclusivism, plurality, particularity, difference, and similar concepts may not provide much outcome, because they usually maintain a theoretical gap between essentializing faith traditions and lived faith.

To the 'so what?' question regarding the objects of theological exclusion and social inclusion belongs a call to research those objects in their subjectivity. This implies a search for their identity beyond the labels of the ones to be excluded or those to be included. Having stated this, I argue that the very question about being theologically exclusive and socially inclusive makes sense if practices of the exclusion and inclusion of human beings are addressed in their complexity, inter-relationality, and contextuality.

### **Exclusion and Inclusion for the Sake of Whom or What?**

A majority of contributors to this volume argue that theological exclusion usually translates to or goes together with social exclusion and vice versa. Those contributions again provide avenues for further research regarding the motivation for exclusion or inclusion. The scriptural scholars in particular argued that theological exclusion leads to social exclusion when a community in its understanding of God claims God's truth to such an extent that truth is linked to maintaining the truth-given purity of a community. Put in other words, the volume provides sufficient material to build on when asking questions about the relationship between theological exclusivism and fear, God-fear, or between theological exclusivism and egocentricity, where for the other who has 'sinned', the possibility to be cut off by 'us, who want to stay clean for God's sake' is a 'real solution'.

Nevertheless, the question about the relationship between theological exclusivism and a community's interests in social inclusion needs to be further investigated. To begin: Where exactly and how do faith communities, in this case Christian churches, practice social inclusion? Here again, one immediately realizes that the issue of being theologically exclusive and socially inclusive can only be discussed in concrete situations. Why? Because the question can never be separated from the theology, the God-question, of a particular community. How people believe and confess God prescribes how they conceive of sin and how they go about both being exclusive and inclusive. It does so not in the logic of 'tell me about your God and I will know how theologically exclusive and socially inclusive you are'. The God question of any particular community asks for a continuous re-interpretation



of the theological vocabulary of that particular community – for example, the notion of sin, to start with.

Approaching issues of exclusion and inclusion through understandings of God within a community must also serve to acknowledge God as an active agent within and with human agency. Such an interaction is inseparable from hermeneutics of experiences, histories, and memories of God within and of a particular community. One might think of how understandings of God and, in light of these, ideologies within certain faith traditions change. The examples of the ordination of women, racism, slavery, or colonization might demonstrate identity shifts, implying theological shifts and social praxis within a particular community.

The aforementioned observations again ask for investigating the consequences of practices of exclusion and inclusion for societies at large and for smaller sociological entities. Christian communities, while having their own microcosm, are also part of larger socio-political entities. This relatedness also calls for revisiting the theological-missiological language through which one speaks about exclusion and inclusion.

## On Boundaries

A notion central to the everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion is that of boundaries. Politicians, religious leaders, and other leading figures in public discourses worldwide evoke the symbol of boundary. They seem to work with an extended boundary-related terminology to negotiate belonging in all its complexity (citizenship, family, religious communities, ethnicity, social status, profession) and habitability in all its dimensions (limit, frontier, border, line, borderline, brink, periphery, margins, terminal, horizon, fence, wire fence, wall). From a missiological perspective, the notion of boundary has been applied as an analytic tool for addressing religious belonging and identity formation.<sup>5</sup> Following the ontological and epistemological argument, the symbol of boundary would help us use it in meaningfully answering identity questions such as: Who am I? Who are we as a church?

5 Mechteld Jansen, for example, went so far as to use the notion of 'boundary' for the definition of missiology as a discipline. Mechteld Jansen, *God op de Grens: Missiologie als theologische begeleiding bij grensoverschrijding – Inaugurele Rede Protestantse Theologische Universiteit* (Utrecht/Kampen/Leiden: Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, 2008); Mechteld Jansen, 'God on the Border – Missiology as Critical Theological Guidance for Crossing Borders', in *Mission Revisited Between Mission History and Intercultural Theology: In Honor of Pieter N. Holtrop*, ed. Volker Küster (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011): 45–62.

Who are we as Christian communities? It may be a useful exercise to reflect on Christian ethics lived out through the symbol of boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Yet, besides the fact that boundary making involves both inclusive and exclusive practices, this symbol is already theologically heavily charged. For example, theologians speak about an ontological boundary between the Creator and creation, or about Jesus crossing the boundary between the divine and the human.<sup>7</sup> The boundaries of the Garden of Eden and exclusion from the Garden or inclusion within it embrace through the cross of Jesus Christ or exclusion because of Jesus. Moreover, different meanings of the symbol of the boundary inform readings of societies and build up particular taxonomies. For example, for theology-missiology<sup>8</sup> the notion of boundary together with its synonyms matter because they provide a framework in which inter-relationality – conceived as cross-border/boundary-crossing transactions (inter-relationality) and various forms of isolation at all levels of creation – can be studied. These cross-boundary studies may lead to a practice of intercultural theology, as a theological method, to be introduced and taught at the level of Christian communities.<sup>9</sup> In my observation all contributions open up conversations on exclusion and inclusion through the symbol of boundaries.

Discourses on exclusion and inclusion looked at through the symbol of the boundary also call attention to marginality, which is another key concept in theology and missiology worldwide. Recent mission documents/encyclicals of the Vatican, ecumenical documents such as *Together towards Life* (World Council of Churches), or *Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* mirror that theologizing on marginality has been internalized in diverse Christian communities worldwide. Nevertheless, propagating claims for 'God's

6 For a pioneering work in studying identity-formation as collective social and not necessarily cultural constructs, see Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1969). See also Richard Alba, 'Bright Versus Blurred Boundaries: Second-Generation Assimilation and Exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, no. 1 (2005): 20–49; Nils Witte, *Negotiating the Boundaries of Belonging: The Intricacies of Naturalisation in Germany* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018); Ilker Ataç und Sieglinde Rosenberger, eds., *Politik der Inklusion und Exklusion* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2013); Steven Vertovec, 'The Social Organization of Difference', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 8 (2021): 1273–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1884733>.

7 Kevin Vanhoozer and Martin Warner, eds., *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

8 For more on the conjunction theology-missiology, see Dorottya Nagy, 'Theology-Missiology on the Move: Loving and One Another, Back to Basics', *Exchange*, 45, no. 4 (2016): 364–81.

9 Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

preference for the margins' or 'missions from the margins' to a certain extent presupposes the maintenance of margins and often leaves the link between doctrinal exclusion and social inclusion (or the other way around) unaddressed.

### **Exclusion and Inclusion in which Context?**

Acknowledging the presence, challenge, and identity of the other in terms of inter-relationality requires reflections on context. Conversations on and practices of inclusion and exclusion never happen in a vacuum, nor are they only historically rooted, but they are or touch upon existential questions of human identity (both in individual and collective forms) *hic et nunc*.<sup>10</sup> Conversations and practices of exclusion and inclusion grow in abundance in the richness of the God-beliefs of the subjects who perform inclusion and/or exclusion through a complex web of inter-relationality.

After reading to the contributions within this volume, one of the major theological-missiological tasks ahead is to contextualize the findings in such a way that they start speaking afresh in the Netherlands of the twenty-first century and perhaps wider Europe. Interreligious dialogue, living together with people of other faiths, re-discussing the position of the women in some churches but also in wider society, considering meal-sharing and table-fellowship as facilitated by churches, processing colonialization, discussion on moral behaviour, and issues of xenophobia and racism are all valid indicators within this volume to embark on further research. In the following I wish to address a couple of context-definers and highlight through them further issues for research.

### **Theology of Religions or Theologising about the Faith of the Other**

This volume faces up to the challenge of seeking theological-missiological answers to questions posed by the otherness of fellow human beings in the multi-ethnic, multifait, multilingual, and multicultural society of the Netherlands and perhaps of wider Western Europe. The central arguments of the volume mirror a tension between intellectual discourses about flow, fluidity, and porous boundaries and practices of inclusion/exclusion as everyday experiences. Biblical scholars discussing difficult biblical texts

10 This approach is a modern one; see Kwang-ki Kim, *Order and Agency in Modernity: Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkel*, (New York: State University New York, 2003), 28–30.

on exclusion have pointed to nuances and complexities hidden in the presupposed context and communities in which such texts have been formulated, read, and used. It seems that the contributors of this volume provide fundamental arguments for re-readings of 'difficult', violence-related Scripture/Bible texts.

The volume pushes towards re-addressing terminology in *theologia religionum* and theologizing on Christian identities relating to people and communities who are identified and are identifying differently than one's own community.<sup>11</sup> The research project took place in conversation with Muslim and Jewish theologians, who from their traditions too, like Christians, need to tackle the contextual issues of inclusion and exclusion, especially because of their diverse scriptural interpretations throughout history and in different contemporary settings; these also produce practices of exclusion and/or inclusion.<sup>12</sup> What makes the encounter of representatives from these three faith traditions on the issues of exclusion and inclusion relevant is that they all bear in mind that questions about exclusion and inclusion implicitly touch such significant soteriological questions as 'who is/will be saved?' and 'what is salvation?'

They also bear in mind that some of the representatives from one's broad tradition may come closer to representatives of another religious tradition than to beliefs within one's own tradition.<sup>13</sup> Put it differently: the issues of exclusion and inclusion, also when it comes to significant soteriological questions, become meaningful and interpretable within the lived reality of faith-practising people.

11 On this issue, see some of the output of the research project 'Religion in Processes of Inclusion and Exclusion' at the University of Vienna. For example, Martin Rothgangel, Ednan Aslan, and Martin Jäggle, eds., *Religion und Gemeinschaft: Die Frage der Integration aus christlicher und muslimischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2013); Regina Polak and Wolfram Reiss, eds., *Religion im Wandel: Transformation religiöser Gemeinschaften in Europa durch Migration – Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015).

12 Although there is solid scholarship arguing on the exclusive nature of the three so-called Abrahamic and monotheistic religions, exclusion and inclusion are constant negotiables in other faith traditions as well, as they are part of identity dynamics of any organized group. See Roger Trigg, *Monotheism and Religious Diversity: Elements in Religion and Monotheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108637503>.

13 Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010). See also the KAICIID Beyond Dialogue Series of three volumes: vol. 1: Patrice Brodeur, ed., *Dialogue beyond Dialogue: Perspectives From 'The Outside' and 'The Inside'* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021); vol. 2: Karsten Lehmann, ed., *Taking Dialogue: Eleven Episodes in the History of the Modern Interreligious Dialogue Movement* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021); vol. 3: Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Renata Smith, eds., *Improving the Impact of Interreligious Dialogue: On the Evaluation of Interreligious Dialogue Activities* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

This reality, lived beliefs, breaks open but does not relativize all hermetically, conceptually, and doctrinally constructed and closed religions and religious systems and their taxonomy,<sup>14</sup> because it poses the ultimate question about one's or a community's belief in God. What kind of belief in God is in force? Who is the God and how is the God through whom narrative sense-making and social action happen?<sup>15</sup> Which texts, narratives, and/or oral traditions and collective and/or individual memories inform practising exclusion or inclusion within a given place and period of time? Who is God and how is God through whom worldviews (and one's and a community's beliefs and actions) are justified, prescribed, developed, and enforced? What kind of forces are involved in theologizing? Who decides about what is right and what is wrong after all? These questions once again highlight the power relations, for better or worse, ingrained in inter-relationality.

Theologizing missiologizing together with people of other faiths, with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish theologians in this particular case, seems to be necessary for finding a communicative language for the *theologia religionum* informed by how people identify as believers. This is not an easy task for theologians, because polarization within societies mirrors that blurred, criss-cross, hybrid discourses within faith traditions as well. Creatively conceived faith identities exist next to categorically defined and doctrinally fixed identities. One may agree with Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* or argue that the many religious categories operant today, or even the very notion of religion, are a product of modernity (at large). Yet empirical research illustrates that such notions, even when invented in the armchairs of theologians and religious studies scholars, have long escaped the conceptual laboratories and became operant, formative, influential, and broad societal discourses. People apply abstract concepts derived from scientific laboratories and identify through them. People talk about 'Islam' or 'Christendom', and by doing so, they generate and regenerate imaginaries, essentialism, and label people. Developing new theological terminology in this case implies a 're-examination of the fundamental concepts' of the theological vocabulary as well. The ongoing task remains to develop new

14 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy, eds, *World Christianity: Methodological Considerations* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

15 Ditte Andersen, Signe Ravn, and Rachel Thomson, 'Narrative Sense-Making and Prospective Social Action: Methodological Challenges and New Directions', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 23, no. 4 (2020): 367–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1723204>.

categories and new concepts – and this ‘will have to be done with the very language that is to be replaced’.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of faith traditions with long histories, one can even argue that modernity has been but another wave in conceiving of new categories of exclusion or inclusion for the sake of identity formation. It is in this sense that I conceive of Christian faith traditions as a religion, as a socially situated practice.<sup>17</sup> The notion of ‘apostasy’ could be seen as an excellent example of how ‘apostasy’, also as a pre-modern concept, has its own histories of exclusion and inclusion. For example, the way in which apostasy became a central notion for exclusion and inclusion among Christians and Jews in various places of medieval Europe, or apostasy in early Islam.<sup>18</sup>

This volume invites further engagement with at least three issues: 1) acknowledging the presence, challenge, and identity of the other in terms of inter-relationality; 2) reflecting on the task of living together with the people of other faiths and ideologies, which asks for a new taxonomy through which the religious/ideological other in the Netherlands and wider Europe can be meaningfully researched and which facilitates meaningful conversations on the relationship between faith and/in society in the public sphere; and 3) the importance of theologizing together with people of other faith/ideologies.

### **ILLUSTRATION: Apostasy: For Making the Theology of Religion Contextual**

In the light of the chain of reflection presented so far, I attend to Göran Larsson’s observation that it is important to examine ‘under what circumstances, when and why the question of apostasy becomes an important trope to evoke’.<sup>19</sup> I have addressed this question to a certain extent by sketching the broader socio-political and religious context in which ‘apostasy’ is being

16 Sabine Selchow, ‘Starting Somewhere Different: Methodological Cosmopolitanism and the Study of World Politics’, *Global Networks* 20, no. 3 (2020): 544–63 (p. 554), <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12262>.

17 Esther McIntosh, ‘Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice’, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 383–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2017.1394211>.

18 Paula Tartakoff, ‘Jewish Women and Apostasy in the Medieval Crown of Aragon, c. 1300–1391’, *Jewish History* 24, no. 1 (2010): 7–32; David Malkiel, ‘Jews and Apostates in Medieval Europe: Boundaries Real and Imagined’, *Past and Present* 194 (2007): 3–34; Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Brothers from Afar: Rabbinic Approaches to Apostasy and Reversion in Medieval Europe* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2021); Uriel Simonsohn ‘Halting Between Two Opinions: Conversion and Apostasy in Early Islam’, *Medieval Encounters* 19, no. 3 (2013): 342–70.

19 Göran Larsson, ‘Disputed, Sensitive and Indispensable Topics: The Study of Islam and Apostasy’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 30, no. 3 (2018): 201–26.

'evoked' both in academic discourses and as a community issue within multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multicultural polarizing democracies in Europe. While apostasy as a theological notion has a long history within Christian textual and other material sources, in present day discourses in Europe, it is almost exclusively used in relation to Islam. Put in other words, while statistics report on deconversion movements in secularized Europe<sup>20</sup> and a decrease in church membership, and while there are recorded experiences of exclusion because of 'sin' (differently defined by different traditions), these dynamics are rarely framed through the notion of apostasy.

A specific discourse on apostasy appears in Christian–Muslim encounters through conversion narratives; the formula is more complicated because apostasy also came to function as a legal term in the legal systems of the democracies in Europe. Apostasy as a theological notion enters the field of refugee jurisprudence in Europe's numerous nation states (e.g. the Netherlands), and as a legal term of Islamic jurisprudence it also enters the field of, for example, various Christian communities – with Muslims converting to Christianity – which usually have little or no knowledge of apostasy as a legal concept nor as an Islamic theological notion.<sup>21</sup> In this apparently complex and blurred context in which apostasy becomes a keyword for identity construction, I restrict myself to a few reflections on the issue of apostasy and Christian discourses.

The circumstances under which apostasy has been recently evoked within contemporary discourses in Europe can be grouped under at least four categories: 1) Christians' concern and care for religious freedom all around the world. Particular attention has been given to persecuted Christians in (usually) so called Islamic countries and to converts to Christ (mainly) in Islamic countries. 2) A second discourse can be identified in those European societies in which the Muslim-Christian cohabitation leads to mix households. In these cases various forms of Islam and Christianity intersect and negotiate exclusion or inclusion. 3) A separate Christian discourse conceives

20 It is beyond the limitations of this contribution to separately address the notion of deconversion as a possible pair concept with apostasy. The notion once again calls attention to power relations and agency in relation to religious identity formation/negotiation: apostasy versus deconversion? See more on this in the work of Heinz Streib and colleagues. For example, Heinz Streib, Barbara Keller, Ramona Bullik, Aniks Steppacher, Christopher F. Silver, Matthew Durham, Sally Barker, and Ralph W. Hood, *Deconversion Revisited: Biographical Studies and Psycho-metric Analyses Ten Years Later* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666568688>.

21 Joshua Ralston, *Law and the Rule of God: A Christian Engagement with Shari'a: Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108779494>.

of responses to apostasy within the so-called secularized societies within Europe. 4) A fourth, and perhaps the most expanded, Christian discourse on apostasy is in relation to asylum and refugee law through which apostasy can be interpreted as a valid reason for providing a person with a refugee status. Christians and Christian communities in this case once again are confronted and challenged with various operant notions of apostasy, and usually the engagement with it happens through conversion narratives. Christian identity formation takes place in direct relation to apostasy.

All four discourses entail the danger of essentializing both Muslimness and Christianness; yet all four discourses are informed by empirical experiences as well. The four discourses challenge Christian theology to engage with the issue and practice of apostasy at different levels, yet they all ask for conceiving of theology as public missiology,<sup>22</sup> a theology which stays close to life in all its complexity. From a Christian perspective, engagement with apostasy leads to the theological questions of sin as estrangement from God explained through the notion of idolatry.

A possible way to establish a theological-missiological engagement informed by Biblical texts with the issue of apostasy and its relation to idolatry may be to keep alive the stories of the faithful ones' estrangement from the God who seeks to be close to God's creation and encompass it all. 'The searing memory of apostasy with the golden calf overshadows the giving of the Decalogue, so that the recitation of the law can never be unaccompanied by the reminder that idolatry is the first act of the covenant people themselves.'<sup>23</sup> The memories of apostasy of Christian communities and individuals are memorized through the hermeneutics of exclusion and inclusion throughout the canonical texts and beyond. This memory of apostasy and the memories and hermeneutics of how God has dealt with idolatry will remain a primal theological question for any Christian community. Christians – based on their understanding of being accepted and loved by God or being rejected and punished by God – will continue to practise exclusion and/or inclusion in whatever situations and under whatever circumstances.

Theologically speaking, it is the hermeneutics of God, how human beings perceive, experience, and understand God in all God's relationality, that informs and creates practices of exclusion or inclusion. As I argued above,

22 Gregg Okesson, *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

23 Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), vol. 1, 20.



such hermeneutics are informed by spirituality, the believed and practised relationship of the confessing community and individual with God and God's creation at large. Here again, the distinction between social dimensions and doctrinal dimensions of faith seem to become problematic, because faith always implies embodiment, life in words and deeds. To push the imaginary further, God takes place in times, spaces, and situations. God in God's relationality is always an event.<sup>24</sup> Speaking of God as an event, I understand God's acting, creating, redeeming, doing, loving, speaking, and God's being until the infinity of verbs. God is an event within a hermeneutical communion, a community of people confessing God, in an inter-related world. God makes no sense without relationality. In this respect God can become an excluding or an including event for those relating to a community.

Such an explicit yet minimalist theological-missiological entry to engage with apostasy may need further elaboration to be able to function in an interdisciplinary fashion, but it might be explicit and sufficient enough for Christian communities and Christians to further theologize-missilogize on exclusion and inclusion through the entry of apostasy.

### Turning towards the Flipsides

Contextualizing the tension of theological exclusion and social inclusion implies attention to some flipsides of the leading question of this volume. Giving attention to such flipsides, I seek to further problematize a dichotomy which in theology often goes together with the theological exclusion–social inclusion divide and becomes visible in how mission and *diaconia* are set apart both in academic and ecclesial practice. I argue that the volume raises serious questions about the feasibility of such a divide. I seek to address this issue by introducing the notion of social exclusion as taken from societal discourses and policy making and as a problem which should be countered through social inclusion. I argue that a contextual analysis of social exclusion in the Netherlands may lead to further theologies on practices of exclusion and inclusion. More specifically, the conversation set out in this volume calls for a theological-missiological engagement with how theological exclusivism and social inclusion and vice versa relate to understandings of the notion of sin, especially systemic sin.

For numerous years social exclusion in the Netherlands was mainly linked to the issue of poverty. The link between religion and social exclusion has

24 John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

also been mainly made through the lens of poverty.<sup>25</sup> A recently conducted mixed-method survey about social exclusion among Dutch citizens in four major cities in the Netherlands, however, concludes that there is a direct link between social exclusion and immigration histories, implying diverse identity layers such as ethnicity, language, colour of skin, religion, and social exclusion. 'High levels of social exclusion were found in 20.0% of the urban population of Surinamese origin, 20.9% of Moroccan, 28.7% of Turkish and 4.2% of native Dutch origin.'<sup>26</sup>

The issue of exclusion, however, becomes even more complex when one looks at it from the perspective of ideologies of the welfare state, for example, individualization, personal autonomy, and its institutionalized forms such as single households or homes for the elderly. From this perspective a new term in research on social exclusion in the Netherlands appears: the notion of 'loneliness' (*eenzaamheid*).<sup>27</sup> One in ten Dutch citizens felt lonely in 2019;<sup>28</sup> in Covid-19 times the statistics speak of 47 percent of the population feeling lonely in 2020.<sup>29</sup> While exclusion and loneliness are not the same, the two notions frequently cover the same people, and both point to states of well-being. Exploring the relation between systemic sin and loneliness (people abandoned by people) becomes an urgent theological-missiological task.

Loneliness and social isolation call attention to the issue of individuality and its relation to collectivity/community when reflecting on exclusion and inclusion. They do so in a society with a high degree of individualization and individualism, including religious individualism.<sup>30</sup> While there is a solidly emerging theological-missiological corpus of literature addressing

25 Maarten Davelaar, Jessica van den Toorn, Nynke de Witte, Justin Beaumont, and Corien Kuiper, *Faith-Based Organisations and Social Exclusion in the Netherlands* (Leuven: Acco, 2011).

26 A. P. L van Bergen, A. van Loon, M. A. S de Wit, Stella J. M. Hoff, Judith R. L. M. Wolf, and Albert M. van Hemert, 'Evaluating the Cross-Cultural Validity of the Dutch Version of the Social Exclusion Index for Health Surveys (SEI-HS): A Mixed Methods Study', *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 11 (2019): e0224687, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0224687>.

27 See 'Eenzaamheid', VZinfo, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.volksgezondheidenzorg.info/onderwerp/eenzaamheid>.

28 'Bijna 1 op de 10 Nederlanders voelde zich sterk eenzaam in 2019', CBS, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/13/bijna-1-op-de-10-nederlanders-voelde-zich-sterk-eezaam-in-2019>.

29 'Eenzaamheid', VZinfo, accessed 20 February 2022, <https://www.volksgezondheidenzorg.info/onderwerp/eenzaamheid/cijfers-context/huidige-situatie>.

30 'New sources report on loneliness as a new epidemic (Cox 2016; see also Bernstein 2015; Murray 2015; Nutt 2016; Pennycook 2016; Sim 2015), as a psychological problem with major medical implications', Christopher S. Swader, 'Loneliness in Europe: Personal and Societal Individualism-Collectivism and Their Connection to Social Isolation', *Social Forces* 97, no. 3 (2019): 1307–36 (p. 1308), <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soyo88>.

the ‘illness’ of the so-called welfare societies worldwide through the notion of isolation<sup>31</sup> or egocentrism,<sup>32</sup> loneliness and individuality looked at through the question of exclusion and inclusion lead to new ways of conceiving the question of people of other faiths/ideologies as well.

Besides poverty, the variables to which theology-missiology needs to attend when reflecting on exclusion and inclusion are migration, religion, sexual identity, gender, education, and these variables as interrelated in a multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multicultural society scoring high on loneliness. Theoretical frameworks for exclusion and inclusion as existential markers of identity formation and belonging need then to be placed in such broader societal contexts in which the aspects listed have consequences for policy making and governance.<sup>33</sup> Within these conceptual frameworks, the notion of ‘polarization’, already introduced above, needs to be added as well. A new intensity of polarizations within European democracy is notable.<sup>34</sup> Polarization, linked to religion, also refers to conflict within societies, to practices of exclusion and inclusion. Such practices are based on normative values, ideologies (worldviews), and claims of truth. Typical of polarization is that it cuts communication between groups with different worldviews, and the lack of communication implies an increase in violence and aggression both verbally and physically. The Other reduced to an object or a thought can be more easily violated, ‘sent to hell’, or even executed than the Other whom one encounters for the sake of a conversation.

### ILLUSTRATIONS of Flipsides

I will now point out three aspects which could be further explored now that I have contextualized the relevance of theologically addressing practices of

31 Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2015).

32 Erik Borgman, *Een theologische visie voor de 21ste eeuw: Inleiding, Invocatio* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020).

33 For the question about religion, see Wibren van der Burg and Wouter de Been, ‘Social Change and the Accommodation of Religious Minorities in the Netherlands’, *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8 (2020): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22124810-2019004>.

34 F. Casal Bértoa and José Rama, ‘Polarization: What Do We Know and What Can We Do About It?’ *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021): art. 687695, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.687695>; Lucia Cianetti, *The Quality of Divided Democracies: Minority Inclusion, Exclusion, and Representation in the New Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Anja Hennig and Oliver Fernando Hidalgo, ‘Illiberal Cultural Christianity? European Identity Constructions and Anti-Muslim Politics’, *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090774>; Stephen Pihlaja, *Talk about Faith: How Debate and Conversation Shape Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

exclusion and inclusion by looking at the flip sides of the question of being theologically exclusive yet socially inclusive and by doing so from the entry point of loneliness:

- a. The issue of intergenerationality (aging society, the theorized generations of X, Y, Z) in the Netherlands and wider Europe allows one to look at dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from generational studies. Generational studies prove to be fruitful partners in theology's search for understanding societal transformation because they draw attention to the generational component of inter-relationality and how generational identities cause cultural transformation within societies.

Theologies of exclusion and inclusion have generational markers. For example, the social and religious transformation of what has been called the Bible Belt has strong generational markers.<sup>35</sup> Generational markers fuel dynamics of exclusion and inclusion: generational lines play a role in the formation of new Christian communities in the Bible Belt.

A focus on intergenerational issues in addressing the tension of theological exclusion and social inclusion raises the question about the difference between the faith and faith embodiment (lived faith) across generational lines. Abandoning 'my father's faith' or being 'abandoned by my father because of my faith' are statements which thematize the relevance of intergenerationality for discussing theological exclusivity and social inclusivity within the Netherlands and elsewhere.

- b. Immigration as an analytic concept and referring to an intensified diversification of 'Dutch citizenship' may also provide fresh tools for looking at patterns of exclusion and inclusion. Immigration, especially after World War II and in the period of the so-called decolonization, resulted in accelerating societal belonging through citizenship. While attempts to canonize 'Dutchness' remain, religious diversification in everyday life becomes negotiable for exclusion and inclusion. It is through immigration that Islam in all its diversity, but also one's skin colour, became major factors for negotiating exclusion and inclusion, also in religious terms. The binary of Dutch churches versus migrants' churches provides excellent cases for researching the core question of the consultation. The global experience of the attacks of 11 September 2001 in America and its interpretation within different collectives further

35 On the socio-religious transformation of the Bible Belt, see Anneke Pons-de Wit, Dick Houtman, J. Exalto, F. A. van Lieburg, J. H. Roeland, and Maarten Wisse, 'Buildings and Bibles between Profanization and Sacralization: Semiotic Ambivalence in the Protestant Dutch Bible Belt', *Material Religion* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2018.1541696>.

strengthen the tension between exclusion and inclusion within societies such as the Netherlands.

- c. Throughout the consultation and also in the essays of this volume, a prominent component of the context stayed in the background: a highly digitalized human existence and its implication for practices of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>36</sup> By internetization I mean that digital technology at large shapes and even defines identity construction. Social, political, and religious life happen both online and offline, and in the tension of these two. Christian communities also seem to lag behind in dealing with the challenges for inclusion and exclusion provided by the digital age. Religious identity in a highly digitalized society is affected by one's own digital presence and journey. The kind of social media, the kind of information that guides one's understanding of the other, shapes one's image of God and leads to concrete acts of hate or love towards the other; these views are highly influenced by the Internet. With this argument, I also place the central question of the consultation within the tension of institutionalized religion and individualized religiosity.<sup>37</sup> Which forms of technologically transmitted beliefs shape individual and collective identities within a perpetually individualizing and polarizing society? Why does the Internet matter in religious exclusion and inclusion?

Returning to the 'so what?' question: in the light of what I have mapped so far in terms of issues arising from the richness of this volume, the question should be kept alive as to what makes the enquiry on theological exclusion and social inclusion a valid theological research question within the context of the Netherlands and beyond. Where does the relevance of this question come from? How can it be best addressed both theologically and in an interdisciplinary fashion?

36 There are a number of issues and questions that theology-missiology needs to address. For example, that posed by Robert Sanders, 'ESSS Outline: Digital Inclusion, Exclusion and Participation', *Iriss* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.31583/esss.20200911>, on digital exclusion and inclusion as the ability of social participation. Likewise, the issue of religion in digital space, as seen, e.g. in Kiran Vinod Bhatia, 'Religious Subjectivities and Digital Collectivities on Social Networking Sites in India', *Studies in Indian Politics* 9, no.1 (2021): 21–36, doi:10.1177/2321023021999141. And the ongoing question: What happens with religious identities online? See Antonio Spadaro SJ, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press 2014); Cees Zweistra, *Verkeerd verbonden: Waarom sociale media ons eenzaam maken en hoe je dit kunt voorkomen* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2020).

37 Ulrich Beck, *Der eigene Gott: Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Religionen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2008), English edition: *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

## Practising Exclusion and Inclusion

A possible starting point in picking up the questions of the last section is to experiment with yet another variation of the leading question: To what extent are churches, Christian communities through their doctrinal systems and in their practising of faith, at least complicit in excluding members either actively or indirectly? The latter means that church members decide themselves to end membership. Exclusion is always a violent act and theologically implies the question about violence relating to one's image of God. My attempt to introduce this variation on the leading question seeks to invert the argument on the individualization and secularization theses, which either argue for the disappearance of religion from the public sphere or for a rapid deinstitutionalization and disappearance of religion within societies in Europe (at least in Northern and Western Europe).<sup>38</sup>

The question put in this way seeks to understand the links between the so-called secularization thesis and individualism thesis and the Christian communities' active role in these processes. The argument goes beyond proposing an examination of the extent to which churches have been not so much a victim of what are called secularization processes but active agents of them. What is the relationship between empty churches and growing Christian communities, between inclusive faith and exclusive faith? Such questions again need a historical scale in which they can be meaningfully addressed. The same questions should be asked with respect to inclusion. When read from such perspectives, theories of the role of religion in contemporary Europe, such as believing without belonging<sup>39</sup> or its counter model, belonging without believing,<sup>40</sup> may not help us further because they seem not to work with concepts such as conversion, apostasy, violence, exclusion, and inclusion.

The actual social-political, cultural, and religious diversity in the Netherlands has intensified since World War II. Many Christian communities,

38 Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel, 'Religious Individualization or Secularization? Testing Hypotheses of Religious Change – The Case of Eastern and Western Germany', *The British Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 4 (2007): 603–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00168.x>.

39 Grace Davie, 'Believing without Belonging: A Framework for Religious Transmission', *Recherches sociologiques* 3 (1997): 17–37; Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, 'Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 157–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1759897>.

40 Daniël Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000) and 'Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity', in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2001): 161–75. Hervieu-Léger's understanding of religion in secularized Europe as a 'chain of memory' might prove to be helpful for addressing exclusion and inclusion.

including theological educational institutions, are lagging behind in addressing such questions as: In what ways and with what kind of theologies have they actively taken part in socio-political and religious changes within society after World War II? Such short-term historical assessment on theological participation in shaping public and private spheres of life in the Netherlands will have a snowball effect and will open up the avenue for asking questions about the communities' earlier historical practices of exclusion and inclusion. When addressing practices of exclusion and inclusion, one needs to consider various contextual dimensions, such as colonialization, slavery, racism, mission organizations, democracy, the welfare state, decolonization, manifold types of migration movements (labour migration being one of the most important ones), pillarization (*verzuiling*) and depillarization (*ontzuiling*),<sup>41</sup> education, and how they are linked to religious communities, in this case particularly, to one's own Christian community.

This question is a sensitive and a complex one, yet a question which constantly accompanies Christians and Christian communities who practise conversion. Conversion in this sense means acknowledging estrangement from God, who longs to continue to work together with human beings for the well-being of all. Conversions invite revisiting time and again understandings of God which inform faith and social action. Understandings of God then lead to reflections on enacted spirituality both at an individual and collective level. For example, to what extent is there a link between discourses on empty churches and a full or even overpopulated land?

In this respect, any theological-missiological reflective model which seeks to disclose the hermeneutical praxis of inclusion and exclusion of a community can be useful. The praxis matrix or praxis cycle as developed at the UNISA school of missiology invites practising contextual theology through the entry points of ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action, reflexivity, agency/identification, and contextual understanding.<sup>42</sup> Any of these notions can be taken as a possible entry point for a hermeneutical exercise around a specific theological-missiological question. The hermeneutical exercise, however, needs to result in action. The centre through which the above mentioned entry points meet each other is the notion of 'spirituality'. Kritzinger chooses to illustrate the praxis matrix by drawing a flower. Each notion introduced above can be

41 Peter van Dam, 'Constructing a Modern Society Through "Depillarization": Understanding Post-War History as Gradual Change', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28, no. 3 (2015): 291–313, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12074>.

42 J. N. J. (Klippiess) Kritzinger, 'Mission in Prophetic Dialogue', *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 35–49 (p. 37).

written on a petal of the flower which is then held together by spirituality as the centre.

The model thus visualizes that spirituality is at the heart of the praxis, analysis, and theology. It is through an acknowledged and confessed God-belief that all other named areas (the list remains tentative) can be interpreted. A particular God-belief opens or blinds the eyes of an individual or a community to see or to ignore the complex issues involved in agency (who are the actors, who are involved?) regarding practices of exclusion or inclusion. The contextual understanding seeks to define how these actors are involved in practices of exclusion and inclusion. Within this contribution I have presented a possible way of conceiving of context. Conceiving of context means addressing inter-relationality in its complexity. The headings of reflexivity and discernment for action especially involve an intensified mixing of cognitive and emotive functions as performed in liturgies and rituals.

The model introduced here can be adopted as an academic analytic tool, and it is also applicable at the level of a Christian community or individual faith analysis. It helps in answering the questions: Who am I? Who are we? Based on what kind of belief in and history with God and fellow human beings do I/we claim certain identities? The model helps in conceiving of practices of exclusion and inclusion as identity issues to be continuously revisited. It also offers a tool for the readers of this book to critically engage with the various contributions to this volume. Through such a hermeneutical model, one could revisit the findings and proposals of the contributions to this volume and broaden the complexity of discourses on exclusion and inclusion through further questions such as: Who reads the Bible and why? Who highlights the difficult texts, how, and why? Which concepts are introduced to link apostasy, exclusion and inclusion of old times, text, and context with contemporary issues? The contributions to this volume have demonstrated how the reading and interpretation of the same textual sources may lead to different and even irreconcilable practices of exclusion and inclusion. One can see then how gender, religious truth, body, food, law, and terminology all re-enter the stage. They articulate the importance of theologizing together with people of other faiths/ideologies and of doing so even more concerning practices of exclusion and inclusion.

### **Conclusion: “So What?”**

In the search for the answer to the ‘so what?’ question in relation to the material of this book, I have structured this chapter by first problematizing some of the hidden assumptions in the theological exclusive–socially inclusive pair



and argued that this pair does not work in abstraction unless a claim is made that the object of both the exclusion (theological) and inclusion (social) is the same. This precision then took me to the question about the arguments which fuel practices of exclusion and/or inclusion. I have concluded and joined these two sections by introducing the notion of boundary, which then took me further towards placing the abstract question on being theologically exclusive yet socially inclusive in context. I have then sketched the context of contemporary society in the Netherlands and wider Europe.

Within this context I have identified two major issues which need further investigation. These are two sides of the same coin out of which the following calls for academic action arise: the call to develop a new theology of engagement with people of other faiths/ideologies and the call to ask the theological question about practices of inclusion and exclusion by starting with the notion of social exclusion. I argued that such a starting point has the potential for preserving the dichotomy between mission and *diaconia*, a dichotomy which seems to be stubbornly misleading many research fields of theology, and certainly the theology of religions.

I have then highlighted both issues with illustrations: apostasy, intergenerationality, immigration, and internetization. The last section of the chapter draws together all the stipulated topics under the section 'practising exclusion and inclusion' and provides a tool, a method to be experimented with when internalizing the question around exclusion and inclusion both at the level of a faith community and academia. The question to start with is: To what extent has a particular church been complicit in practices of exclusion? I have called for an awareness of spirituality as a notion that covers both theories of God and faithful practice and helps in revisiting memories of exclusion and inclusion from a 'spiritual' posture.

Theology as an academic enterprise also operates from certain spiritual postures. Throughout these reflections, I argue for the need for new theological-missiological terminology. The jury is out on what the reader will make of this volume and how this postlude will stimulate one to embark on new journeys. As for me: I stick to those who foster discernment and the courage to be and allow others the wholeness to exist and become.

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# 18 Religious Exclusivism, Social Inclusion: Theological Reflections

*Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher*

## Abstract

The leading question in this volume was the question as to how religious exclusivism relates to social inclusion. This concluding contribution highlights some of the theological challenges that arise from this research. It thinks about the concept of inclusion and the relationship between the religious and the social realm. Next, it offers some thoughts about the nature of holy texts, God, and the religious community. And it concludes by putting down some questions about living together in a multireligious world.

**Keywords:** inclusion, exclusion, hermeneutics, apostasy, multireligious world

## Introduction

The main question in the enquiry presented in this volume is how religious exclusivism relates to social inclusion. Is it possible, and if so how, to be religiously exclusive yet socially inclusive? Within this volume we tried to reflect on this question from a multidisciplinary perspective; a range of scholars offered their specific contributions to this subject. The diversity of topics and methods used in this volume illustrates the complexity of the question<sup>1</sup> and indicates that further research and reflection is needed. Dorottya Nagy presented a reflection on these contributions from a mis-siological perspective (Chapter 17). In this final chapter we highlight some of the challenges from a theological angle. This can only be preliminary, as

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. van de Beek, 'To Be Excluded', unpublished paper, 2021, 1.

it is clear that further research on this theme is worthwhile. Therefore, we would like to pose some thoughts that touch on the question: What are the theological challenges we are faced with when it comes to the relationship between religious exclusivism and social inclusion?

### What about Inclusion?

Firstly, in the current discussion within society, it seems that inclusion is the norm. Exclusive religious texts are problematic, and people are suspicious of exclusivism (Dirk-Martin Grube, Chapter 2). Is that justified? Jack Barentsen and Robert Ermers have shown that we cannot do without certain kinds of exclusion. As seen from the perspective of social identity theory, when we want to define our identities as a group or as individuals, we need some kind of exclusion of others, marking those outside the group (cf. Chapters 2 and 3).<sup>2</sup> Ermers shows how group security depends on the adherence to the group identity. We could even ask if inclusion exists without some kind of exclusion at all. That is not only true from a sociological or social identity perspective but also concerning the perception of truth and reality (Bernhard Reitsma, Chapter 1; Grube, Chapter 2). If a certain belief is deemed true, according to the principle of bivalence, it excludes the opposite view (Grube, Chapter 2). The idea of a round earth excludes the belief that it is flat. The Prophet Muhammad is either God's messenger or he is not, and Christ is either the divine Son of God or He is not. Likewise in the area of 'salvation': if salvation is believed to be exclusively through Jesus Christ, then Judaism and Islam cannot be equal ways of salvation. A similar interdependence between exclusion and inclusion is also true in the social realm. We need forms of exclusion to make society work. There are all kinds of arrangements that we have agreed to live by and that exclude everyone who does not abide by them. People who do not want to wear seatbelts in Europe are excluded from doing so or penalized for their own safety. The minority must abide by what the majority or the state has decided on their behalf. We can discuss in what situations the principle of bivalence should be abandoned (as Grube proposes to abandon it in cases of cognitive ambiguity), but the dynamics between the existence of a certain kind of inclusion and exclusion remain.

Secondly, a special form of exclusion is how we deal with the reality of evil. Differences in worldview also result in different views on what is

2 See also Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 27–43.

good and bad and what should be excluded from society. In some situations there is little disagreement: murder is not accepted in any country. However, how to define murder is not that easy and brings many nuances to the table. Honour killings, for instance, are evaluated differently by different cultures. In some it is a legitimate punishment for (religiously and socially) unacceptable behaviour; in others it is one of the worst crimes. This ambivalence is true for many realities in life. The question of exclusion during the Covid-19 pandemic is a clear example. Those who consider the restrictive measurements a much bigger evil than the virus itself prefer to exclude those policies (and often policymakers) that restrict our freedom; those who consider the virus a dangerous threat to human lives, however, exclude the thought that Covid is a simple flu and reject any leniency. The same can be said about the issue of climate change. If one considers it a real threat to our planet, one will exclude any policy that does not strive for a change of behaviour. The exclusion of evil should be right, but the question here is who decides what is evil and what is not. In any case, when evil is defined, it has consequences and necessarily leads to some kind of exclusion.

Thirdly, during this enquiry into the possibility of being religiously exclusive yet socially inclusive, it also became clear how social and religious exclusion and inclusion are linked or even completely interdependent. Is the problem with texts like Deuteronomy 17 theological and religious or is it mainly social and psychological? In other words, is religious exclusivism the main issue at stake or is social exclusivism legitimated by religious convictions? Ermers shows how the fear of 'stigma by association' could result in 'giving up the deviant' in a family to protect their position in society, which sometimes is justified theologically (Chapter 3). For instance, Muslims in the Netherlands mainly have a migration background (*migratieachtergrond*) and are thus from cultural backgrounds different than the traditional Dutch culture. When Christians qualify Islam as a false religion or as inspired by the devil, that sometimes legitimizes social exclusion. Vice versa, Christians in strict Islamic countries have been discriminated against because of their minority status, even though this has never been applied in every time or situation.<sup>3</sup> In the conflict between Al Qaida and the United States, calling the Americans 'Crusaders' has implied the identification of Christians with

3 See Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi. Jews and Christians under Islam* (London/Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), C. Chehata, 'Dhimma', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2000), [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_1824](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1824); Jane D. McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Americans.<sup>4</sup> This is an important observation with regard to the introduction of this volume in which Reitsma introduced Walters and Rousseau, who stated that it is a certain kind of theology that leads to problems for peacefully living together in society (Reitsma, Chapter 1). It could also be the opposite: that a certain kind of sociology and psychology leads to a problematic theology.

All of this shows that our research needs a wider perspective. The question is much more complex than simply religious exclusivism versus social inclusion. There is both exclusivism and inclusivism at the religious and the social level. What exactly is the relationship between both levels? Do religious arguments feed into the social dynamics, or are the social dynamics an expression of a deeper religious reality? And who decides?

So instead of asking the question 'how to be inclusive?', we would rather consider asking questions about what healthy, acceptable boundaries we might live with. And is religion somehow offering us ways to cope with differences, while at the same time contributing to them? Is religion in some way able to contribute to a society that is good for everyone, and what norms and values do we need to accept to keep it liveable for everyone? That requires additional research and a continued dialogue.

## The Nature of Holy Texts

A second issue that surfaces from our discussion is the question of the nature of Holy Scripture and its interpretation. The question of exclusive and excluding texts, especially when they are violent, brings up the question of what to do with these texts. This involves two issues.

First of all, it relates to the question of the nature of 'holy books'. What does it mean that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe that their books are the Word of God or that God speaks through them? Within these traditions there are many different approaches to the nature of revelation, but somehow these books have a special status when it comes to the divine voice. The temptation is to ignore or redefine the more difficult passage that do not fit our understanding of the world and end up with a very pleasant God that is very much according to our liking. These difficult texts can then be seen as the reflection of the primitive faith of these ancient people and their ideas

4 See O. BinLaden, 'Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders', Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, accessed 30 May 2022, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>, where Crusaders stand for Americans.

about God. We now know that God is not like that, but these ancient texts help us to see how faith and religion have evolved over time. This implies that we ourselves in our time are the norm as to what is or is not inspired, what does or does not align with Gods intentions. The question remains: How do we know and who decides? And what about our own 'blind spots' that may become visible only after time? How can Scripture then still have a critical and prophetic voice or function when we eliminate texts that do not suite us? History has proven that this could lead to serious injustice. The Crusades, slavery, and apartheid, among others, have all been justified by using certain parts of Scripture or Christian tradition in a way that is now considered problematic (Eleonora Hof, Chapter 14). Even recently, in the war in Ukraine in 2022, Christian Scripture and tradition has been used both to justify the Russian invasion and the violent resistance of Ukraine.

The question of the nature of 'holy books' points to a hermeneutical challenge. How do we read inspired texts and how do we bridge the gap between the original context and the present? Do we take every word and sentence literally as if these books were written today and deal with our present problems? Or do these texts leave room for contextualization? Many extremist traditions like the Christian Lord's Army in Uganda, the Islamic movements of ISIS and Boko Haram, and the radical extremist Jewish groups like Kach and the Revolt Terror Group tend to read the holy books as if there is no historical gap between the time they were written and the present.

One thing that has become clear throughout this volume is that the religious texts are part of a community and are read and interpreted from within that community. They are part of a history of a religious group and its tradition. They simply cannot be read as incidental texts with an unchanging, everlasting meaning. The texts are alive and need to be read and interpreted in every context and every situation. They are not understood by individuals or experts only, but by the faithful community in changing circumstances. The community also helps to prevent extremist and simplistic uses of the text. The reinterpretation and adaptation of Deuteronomy 17 in Hebrews 10 illustrates all this. Where stoning is the required punishment in Deuteronomy, in Hebrews this has been adapted to a different kind of (eternal) punishment that is not directed primarily at the physical level but at the eternal, spiritual level, the judgement of God.

Secondly, in the Christian tradition, this is further specified by the question of how what is named the New Testament relates to the Hebrew Scriptures. This is not present in the same way in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, but they face a similar challenge in the relationship between the primary and the secondary sources of revelation. In Judaism there is oral law

apart from the written law, and in Islam there is the Sunnah alongside the Qur'ān and the idea of abrogation. For Christians from the very beginning, there has been a discussion on the remaining value/validity of the Old Testament. Classical Christianity has rejected Marcion's ideas as heretic and asserted that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. However, in the history of Christianity, we see many different ways of looking at the difference between Old and New Testament, between the Old Testament theocratic ideal of Israel and the New Testament perspective of the worldwide Kingdom of God that consists of many peoples and nations. That complexity surfaces again in dealing with the question of exclusivism and inclusion. Are the Old and New Testament perspectives two equally valid and applicable ways of looking at the world, or can we see a kind of development that finds its apex in Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God? Is there an ongoing and developing evolutionary revelation from the Old Testament to the New or are both testaments circular? What does Paul's statement of Christ as the 'end' or 'purpose' (or reality)<sup>5</sup> of the law imply for our understanding of Deuteronomy 17 and other exclusive Old Testament texts? Does it mean that we can simply forget the Old Testament passages, as many Christians tend to do?<sup>6</sup>

One of the issues that was raised in this respect is if it is possible to interpret the scriptures of the religious other. Can Christians take the Qur'ān and purport that what Muslims believe is similar to what Christians read in the Bible? Or, as in the example of *A Common Word*, can Muslims claim that the commandment to love your neighbour in the Christian tradition is comparable to what Islam teaches? Gé Speelman (Chapter 13) has tried to show that 'saming' is a trap for all religious traditions. In relation to the desire to find common ground, to work towards inclusion, it shows us that we should remember the specific identity of every religious person and religious tradition. If we too quickly think we understand the other, it leads to the relativization of each position, whereby the exclusiveness of each religious conviction evaporates. It could lead to the idea that every belief, in the end, is the same.

5 See Bernhard J. G. Reitsma, *The God of my Enemy: The Middle East and the Nature of God* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), ch. 5.

6 This tendency was recognized in the conversations of the participants of the research project. Apart from that, the Chair, who took the initiative for this research project, has also been engaged in research in focus groups in the Netherlands and the Middle East that showed a similar tendency (as can be seen in the unpublished report of the discussion in different focus groups). This demands further research.

## The Nature of God

Following from the discussion concerning our view of Holy Scripture is the question of how we understand the nature of God. Two closely related issues present themselves here.

The first is how God's exclusiveness relates to his inclusivity. In the Bible God seems to be very exclusive in his ordering of the stoning of idolaters and apostates, yet at the same time God is very inclusive in his love for the whole world (John 3:16). As the creator of the world, he is the universal God of every human being (Reitsma, Chapter 1, quoting Sacks). This is also true for Judaism and Islam. On the other hand, God is also presented as the God who elects and rejects, who judges evil and rejects those who reject Him, as in Deuteronomy 17 (cf. John 3:18). If there is no God but God (Jewish and Islamic traditions) and there is no Lord but Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:6, Christian tradition), what then does that mean for those who do not believe in this God? Are they excluded from God's community? Is God conditional in his acceptance of humankind, requiring faith and obedience to his principles and laws? Or is God unconditional in his love?

Following on from the above is the issue of the concept of 'eternal judgement'. If we struggle – as this volume shows – with the idea of punishing apostasy or idolatry as described in Deuteronomy 17, and if the threat of judgement in Hebrews 10 is merely a rhetorical strategy 'of othering those who have already fallen in order to prevent those who have not from doing so' (Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, Chapter 9), should we consider eternal divine punishment a possible reality? Throughout the history of all three monotheistic religions, this has always been a serious prospect. What if we discard the reality of divine judgement? We already mentioned the issue of the reality of evil, the necessity of excluding it, and the question of who decides what is evil and what is not (see paragraph 1, 'What about Inclusion?'). Does the rhetorical nature of Hebrews concerning divine judgement exclude the reality of it? If so, does it not take away the seriousness of the rhetoric? It also seems that Hebrews, by exchanging the punishment of stoning as required in Deuteronomy 17 for a worse punishment, only strengthens the idea of the reality of God's judgement regarding 'the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace' (Heb. 10:29). So, the question remains as to whether there is final judgement and exclusion of evil and a restoration of justice and peace at the end of time. What does our answer mean for those who commit evil, now? And how would we define evil? Is it 'only' wickedness, violence, or injustice on earth, or could



it also include blasphemy or idolatry? And what does that imply for our ideas about judgement in the here-and-now? Do the so-called blasphemy laws in the majority of Islamic countries and still a number of European countries<sup>7</sup> not lead to arbitrariness?

In short, the question concerning God's character is: Does God take evil seriously? And if so, how does this just side of God relate to his creatorship and his love for his creatures?

## The Nature of Religious Communities

Exclusive texts, like those on the validity of the death penalty on apostasy, raise questions concerning the identity of the religious community. These texts presume more or less clear boundaries around the communities. When these boundaries are crossed, there are consequences. As we have seen in this volume, this is true for situations of apostasy or idolatry in all three monotheistic religions. In the Hebrew Bible, crossing other boundaries, like murder, adultery, working on the Sabbath, witchcraft or magic, entail similar consequences.<sup>8</sup> In the Islamic traditions, the same is true for at least blasphemy and adultery. The New Testament does not essentially change that perspective, as we have seen in this volume. However, in Hebrews there is a suspension of the necessity of judgement through actual stoning and a referral to God's judgement at the end of time.<sup>9</sup>

That raises the question of the nature of religious communities. Can we define them by clear boundaries and therefore point out who is and who is not inside exactly? What about the distinction of social identities in cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions (Barentsen, Chapter 4),

7 In the Netherlands the blasphemy law was abolished only in 2014 and in Greece in only in 2019, while in Finland, Germany, Italy, and Russia, it is still in place. According to the Pew Research Center, there were still fourteen countries in Europe and eighteen countries in the Middle East that had some kind of blasphemy law in 2019. See Virginia Villa, 'Four in Ten Countries and Territories Worldwide Had Blasphemy Laws in 2019', Pew Research Center, accessed 16 May 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/25/four-in-ten-countries-and-territories-worldwide-had-blasphemy-laws-in-2019-2/>.

8 A few examples are: Ex. 21:12 (murder); Ex. 21:15, 17 (striking or cursing father/mother); Ex. 21:16 (kidnapping); Ex. 22:17 (witchcraft/divination); Ex. 22:19 (bestiality); Ex. 31:15 (violating the sabbath); Lev. 20:2 (child sacrifice); Lev. 20:10 (adultery); Lev. 20:11–12 (incest); Lev. 20:13 (certain sexual intercourses); Deut. 13:5 (false prophecy).

9 Cf. John 8, probably not original, but an expression of this sentiment in relation to adultery. Who is without sin can throw the first stone, while in Deut. 17 it is the first witness to the crime who must throw the first stone.

and the way this distinction helps us understand the nature of religious communities from different perspectives and regarding different dimensions of being community? For instance, what about someone who (affective and evaluative dimension) participates in the life of the community and experiences fulfilment in this but does not (cognitive dimension) subscribe to the specific beliefs (or, of course, the other way around)? Is this person 'in' or 'out'? Is the creation of boundaries that exclude the ingroup from the outgroup, as in 1 Peter (Kobus Kok, Chapter 8), a helpful tool today? Who decides in the end what the exact boundaries are, especially when interpretations of biblical texts and principles differ in the Christian community? How can we constitute an 'identity in hybridity' (Henk Bakker, Chapter 6)? And what do we gain by it, as faith is not simply an outward reality of rituals and behaviour, but primarily an inward condition of the heart? That condition is invisible and almost impossible to verify. Or should we consider boundaries to be more or less fluid, depending on cultural, sociological, or religious factors? And if so, what does that mean for our research question?

In the history of the Christian community, the predicament of the so called *lapsi* is an interesting illustration. During times of persecution and severe pressure on the Christian community by the state, some Christians fell away and denied their faith in Jesus Christ to preserve their lives or to save their loved ones. There was difference of opinion in the early church as to whether these *lapsi* were allowed to return to the church and under what conditions. Some would give them a second chance if they would repent and confess their sin, others would not allow that, even if they could be forgiven by God. One of the issues, of course, is whether the *lapsi* really turned away from the Christian faith or only pretended outwardly, while retaining their inner faith commitment.

That last question touches upon the situation of so-called secret believers. Many believers in North Korea participate in the required adoration of the state and its leader, suspending public expressions of faith while inwardly still remaining faithful followers of Christ. The same is true for the so-called C6 believers in Travis's C1–C6 spectrum of Christ-centred communities. C6 believers are Muslims who have become followers of Christ, but do not openly confess to that.<sup>10</sup> The contribution of Peter-Ben Smit (Chapter 7), that true faith has a bodily character which has often been underestimated,

10 See John Travis, 'The C1-C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of Christ-Centered Communities Found in the Muslim Context', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1998): 407–8.

raises the question of whether this kind of secret belief can be called a faithful 'bodily' expression of faith. However, that also immediately raises the question of whether anyone but secret believers themselves can make any such evaluation, because it is sometimes impossible to speak up and live out one's faith. The desired ideal is not always the possible reality.

Here it is helpful to recall the distinction between bounded and centred set communities. Paul Hiebert distinguished between these two kinds of communities.<sup>11</sup> The first, the so-called bounded set community defines Christian communities by clear and strict boundaries. This can be a specific definition of faith, ethical rules and principles, or other issues. The boundaries are meant to clearly distinguish who is in and who is out and are necessary to keep the unfaithful out. In this way, the holiness of the community can be protected. To distinguish between believers and unbelievers, strict boundaries are needed. In practice however, it is not easy to define those boundaries, since, again, we can only go by what we see in the lives of people, not what goes on inside their hearts. Centred set (Christian) communities are defined by the direction or movement of the people involved. All who are oriented/focused on or moving towards the centre of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ, are part of the Christian community. Some of them are closer to the centre than others, but what matters is their orientation. Besides, no one is perfect and all are in need of growth or drawing nearer to the centre.<sup>12</sup> It would be interesting to see in what way Hiebert's distinction could help us in our quest for social inclusion in situations of religious exclusion.

## To Execute or Not

Another question that surfaced in the research project and the interaction through the texts of the contributions is the question of whether the religious communities ever strictly applied the principles in the texts of Deuteronomy

11 Paul G. Hiebert, 'Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories', *Gospel in Context* 1, no. 4 (1978): 24–29.

12 The third/fourth category Hiebert introduces are two kinds of fuzzy set communities, in which all who are somewhat connected to the ideals of the community belong to it; see Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 112, quoted in Michael H. Lee, 'Assessment of Paul Hiebert's Centered Set Approach to the Category "Christian"' (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), [https://www.academia.edu/29304541/Assessment\\_of\\_Paul\\_Hieberts\\_Centered\\_Set\\_Approach\\_to\\_the\\_Category\\_Christian](https://www.academia.edu/29304541/Assessment_of_Paul_Hieberts_Centered_Set_Approach_to_the_Category_Christian), accessed May 30, 2022.

17 and the like. The reception history of Deuteronomy 17 does not give indications that this law was widely executed or brought into practice at all (Joep Dubbink and Klaas Spronk, Chapter 5). In the Jewish and Christian tradition, there are some moments in time that in certain groups apostasy has led to exclusion or worse,<sup>13</sup> but in general it seems that communities have been lenient, at least as far as it concerns the official religious or worldly authorities. Up to the present day, that even seems to be the case in strictly Islamic communities, with the obvious exception of Saudi Arabia. However, in different contexts the situation for apostates from Islam is still quite delicate. People are expelled from their communities, can lose their legal status, and in extreme situations face honour-related violence. Even if there is no direct violence, many Muslims who have left Islam witness difficult conditions because of social exclusion and loneliness.<sup>14</sup> This is, however, not limited to Islamic communities. Leo Mock (Chapter 10) has shown that in Judaism the question of apostasy is still very much alive, even if it is not directly linked to violence or the death penalty. The question remains how strong that link has been in history and if it is present in the minds of some Jewish leaders and believers today. In general, in community-oriented societies, as Ermers (Chapter 3) has shown, leaving one's religion is problematic. Those who leave are considered apostates, also in Christian and Jewish communities.<sup>15</sup> Here again, the question arises: Is this mainly a social phenomenon, as Ermers and Barentsen have shown (Chapters 3 and 4), or also a religious one, as Hof shows by introducing Pardue (Chapter 14)?

## Living Together in a Multireligious World

Finally, we can conclude that we need to work more on the question of how to live together as people from different religions or beliefs. What does the tension between exclusion and inclusion, religiously and socially,

13 See B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*, WUNT, ser. 2, 115, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 1–21.

14 See. Ziya Meral, *No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam and Failures of International Community* (London: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008).

15 Joram van Klaveren, a former right wing anti-Islam politician in the Netherlands, converted from Christianity to Islam and called his book that describes his journey *Apostate (Afvallige)*. The Netflix series *Unorthodox* portrays the consequences of leaving Judaism for an orthodox Jewish Girl. In Amish communities those who are considered apostates, who leave the principles of the community behind, are 'shunned'; see for example, 'Why Do the Amish Practice Shunning', Amish America, accessed 30 May 2022, <https://amishamerica.com/why-do-the-amish-practice-shunning/>.

mean for the way of living together in a global world? Can and should we find ways of truly addressing the issues of apostasy and of exclusion and inclusion together in interreligious engagement, locally, nationally, and internationally? Are we able and justified to critically address these kinds of Deuteronomic exclusions in each other's religious texts? And in what way? Do we run the risk of saming (Speelman, Chapter 13)? Can we hold on to the humble perspective Grube sets out (Chapter 2)? Is there a way in which we can safeguard a secure environment in which people of different cultural and religious backgrounds can speak freely? Is there a way to reflect together on how the leaving of one's faith community and the pulling apart of a family relate to each other? And is it possible for us to have this interaction within our own faith communities, the way Yaser Ellethy and Razi Quadir describe (Chapters 11 and 12)? Can we find deeper values that help us understand each other? Or does apostasy have such a disruptive influence in families, faith communities, and/or societies that interreligious dialogue is made impossible by this?

In this context several issues require further reflection. First of all, does the issue of apostasy only raise problems for the individual or could it also force the community to reflect on its identity? As Laura Dijkhuizen and Jack Barentsen show in their case study of the position of women in evangelical communities, apostasy somehow was reversed (Chapter 16). Those who left the congregation and could theoretically be considered the apostates considered those who stayed the real apostates. Those who left stayed with the traditional view on the ordination of women, while those who stayed developed new ideas about women in leadership. So, the strange situation occurred that those who adhered to the classical faith tradition left the community, while those who stayed in the community left the traditional interpretations. That makes the notion of community and apostasy even more complex.

Secondly, the example of the Pela (Simon Ririhena, Chapter 15) is interesting for its potential to bring religiously opposing communities together in a covenant. However, it also raises several questions. Is this model also relevant outside of the Moluccas, in individualistic and secular societies? And, what would happen if someone leaves the Pela and does not want to be part of it any longer? Does that not create the same problems of exclusion and inclusion as the case of apostasy?

Thirdly, we cannot address these issues as if there has been no history between different religious communities. These histories have not always been positive and have led to mistrust, to scars and pain. How do we deal with these histories, especially if certain practices that we disapprove of

nowadays, have been theologically justified during history (cf. Hof, Chapter 14)? Do we have to give account of this history, especially in interreligious contexts? And if so, what are constructive ways of dealing with the past while living in the present?

Fourthly, how do we establish communication/connection between different kinds of cultures and societies? In what way can we at least try to establish understanding between collectivistic and individualistic cultures concerning exclusion and inclusion? How do we use images and ideas from religious, more theocratic societies in secular democratic realities and vice versa?<sup>16</sup> The contributions of Ellethy and Quadir (Chapters 11 and 12) are an illustration of this: If apostasy is related to loyalty, what would that imply today in completely different situations? When apostasy was originally addressed in situations of conflict and war, leaving the faith community implied betrayal of the public society, joining the enemy. What if today Muslims experience leaving Islam as a betrayal of the ummah, the Islamic society, and in a similar way as treason? How does this all relate to the situation of Muslims who leave their faith community? What is the relationship between individual and communal rights?

Finally, most of the contributions in this volume are from a Western, mainly European context. We were a rather diverse group of researchers, and these first delicate steps of encounter have been helpful and promising to the participants. Further exploration is needed to see whether these contributions are also helpful and relevant to people from outside the Western context.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tariq Ramadan in his attempt to create a Western Islam for a new kind of society where Muslims are free to profess their faith in complete freedom. Here, according to Ramadan, the traditional distinction between the Darl al Harb and the Darl al Islam does not apply anymore. See Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).



# Index

- 9/11, 11 September 2001 233-4, 283
- ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ūd 189
- Abraham, Abrahamic 9, 18, 85, 126, 127, 144, 148, 160, 210, 233, 275
- Abrogation 172, 175, 294
- Abu Bakr Ibn Al-Arabi 175
- Abū Bakr Jābir Al-Jazā‘irī 197
- Abū Ḥanīfa 186, 190
- Abu Musa Al-Ash‘ari 177, 178
- Abu Zayd, Nasr Hamid 52
- A Common Word (ACW) 201-14, 294
- Adultery 78, 198, 196, 296
- Ahmediyya 51
- Alalwani, Taha Jabir 68, 190, 193, 194, 196
- Al Qaida 291
- Al-Baghy 189
- Al-Bukhārī 177, 178, 189, 194, 195
- Al-Ibtidā‘ 189
- Al-Irtidād 184
- Allah 17, 158, 166, 169-75, 177, 179, 184, 186-9, 192, 194, 195, 207, 209-11, 238
- Al-Qurtubi 169-72, 174
- Al-Riddah 184
- Al-Sāmarā‘i, Nu‘mān ‘Abd Al-Razzāq 184, 192, 193
- Al-Shawkānī 189
- Al-Tabari, Abu Ja‘far Muhammad bin Jarir 172, 175-7, 208
- Al-Ṭahāwī 186
- Al-walā‘ w’ al-barā 163, 164, 180; *see also* walā‘; *see also* barā’
- Ambiguity 25, 32-5, 290
- Ambon, Ambonese 231, 234, 236-40, 242, 243
- America, American 24, 46, 48-50, 165, 215-20, 222, 224, 226-9, 232, 233, 250, 269, 283, 291, 292, 299
- Ancestors 105, 118, 152, 215, 227, 232, 236, 237, 240, 241
- Annihilation 85, 151
- Anonymous Christians 12, 214
- Apostasy 9, 16, 19, 20-4, 43-5, 47, 49, 50-5, 57-61, 64, 66-71, 73, 75-8, 81, 82, 86, 87, 94, 97, 103, 112, 113, 131-7, 141, 143, 163, 164, 166, 175-80, 183-99, 219, 226, 245-7, 257, 262, 264, 265, 267, 268, 277-80, 285, 287, 289, 295, 296, 299, 300, 301
- Apostate 19, 20, 43, 44, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 60, 63, 67, 68, 87, 95, 96, 97, 99, 131, 133, 135, 136, 138, 139, 141, 143, 144, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 183, 184, 185, 186, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 262, 295, 299, 300
- Apostle 69, 115, 116, 117, 189, 194
- ‘Aqida 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 176, 180, 197
- Asad, Talal 276
- Atheist 44, 46, 54, 56, 184, 198
- Aviner, Shlomoh 150
- Avodah Zrah, tractate of 151, 153, 155
- Ayatollah Khomeini 51
- Bāghī 189, 197
- Bahá‘í 158, 162
- Barā’ 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 171, 173, 174, 176, 180; *see also* walā’
- Bartels, Dieter 237, 238, 242
- Bassiouni, Mahmoud Cherif 197, 198
- Bauckham, Richard 88, 89
- Belief 11, 13, 14, 15, 22, 24, 28-40, 43, 46, 49, 55, 59, 62, 64, 67, 68, 69, 70, 87, 93, 108, 143, 164, 166, 167, 169, 173, 174, 176, 180, 183, 184, 187, 188, 192, 196, 199, 208, 209, 229, 237, 238, 244, 248, 249, 251, 252, 261, 263, 264, 270, 274, 275, 276, 282, 284, 287, 290, 294, 297, 298, 299
- Disbelief 51, 165, 166, 171, 173, 187, 188, 192, 195, 226
- Unbelief 179, 180, 189
- Believe(r) 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 28, 29, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 43, 46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 56, 60, 64, 85, 86, 117-25, 126, 131, 133, 134, 136, 137, 139, 140, 141, 144, 152, 155, 160, 161, 165, 166, 167, 169, 170, 171, 173, 174, 180, 185, 186, 187, 192, 193, 194, 197, 203, 204, 205, 208, 209, 210, 227, 231, 232, 240, 243, 248, 256, 259, 260, 262, 269, 271, 276, 282, 290, 292, 294, 295, 297, 298, 299
- Unbelieve(r) 165, 170, 172, 177, 178, 189, 203, 209, 210, 298
- Disbelieve(r) 51, 163, 166, 169-74, 177, 186-8, 192, 194
- Belonging 47, 59, 62, 64, 72, 78, 105, 121, 158, 167, 172, 247, 251, 254, 261, 262, 263, 267, 268, 272, 282, 283, 285
- Bible/biblical 12, 19, 23, 46, 50, 68, 72, 75, 78, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 90, 91, 92, 96, 114, 118, 134, 135, 144, 147, 148, 149, 151, 161, 162, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 208, 214, 215, 216, 217, 219, 220, 221, 222, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 238, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 268, 269, 270, 274, 275, 279, 283, 287, 294, 295, 296, 297
- Old Testament 24, 69, 120, 144, 233, 294
- New Testament 65, 82, 90, 116, 127, 131, 142, 142, 211, 212, 293, 294, 296
- Biddle, Mark E. 81
- BinLaden, O. 292
- BlaspHEME, blasphemER, blasphemy 97, 99, 141, 296



- Body (physical) 23, 101-14, 152, 221, 287  
   Body of Christ 101  
   Body, theologian of the 101, 102, 103, 112  
 Boko Haram 293  
 Book of Jubilees 148  
 Border 92, 93, 96, 97, 167, 180, 272, 273  
   Borderless 239  
 Boundary, boundaries 11, 59, 61, 66-7, 69-71, 72, 92, 101, 103, 107-8, 115, 117, 118, 119, 122-3, 128, 133, 134, 141, 143, 169, 196, 214, 232, 246, 254, 262, 268, 272-3, 274, 288, 292, 296-8  
 Bromley, David G. 60, 63, 67, 177  
 Brown, Jonathan 178, 179  
 Butler, Judith 101, 102  
  
 C1-C6 Spectrum 297  
 Calvin, J. 81  
 Canaan(ite) 82, 84, 85, 148, 215, 216, 217, 218, 223, 224, 227  
 Capital offence/punishment 19, 20, 60, 77, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 98, 183-6, 189, 190, 193-6, 198  
 Ceram, island of 231, 237, 240  
 Chassidism, Chassidic 159, 160  
 Christ 12, 13, 14, 20, 28, 101-14, 116, 120, 123, 126, 128, 129, 132, 133-7, 139, 141, 142, 144, 210, 211, 213, 216, 225, 249, 251, 259, 260, 269, 270, 273, 278, 279, 290, 294, 295, 297, 298; *see also* Jesus; *see also* Son of God  
 Christian, Christianity 9, 11-4, 16-21, 23-6, 28, 29, 41, 44, 48, 50, 51, 59, 60, 66, 67, 69, 71, 75, 80, 84, 89, 90, 96, 99, 101-103, 105, 108, 110-3, 115-7, 120, 123, 127-30, 132, 134-42, 144, 145, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 162, 167, 168, 171, 179, 183, 184, 185, 198, 199, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 216, 217, 219, 220, 221-5, 227-9, 231-44, 267, 268, 270-3, 275-80, 282-7, 291-5, 297-9, 301  
 Christensen, Duane L. 82, 83  
 Christology, christological 89, 109, 133, 144, 223-5, 228, 229  
 Chrysostom, John 140-1  
 Church 7, 20, 24, 54, 59, 60, 66, 80, 83, 86, 114, 116, 128, 129, 131, 133, 136, 137, 141, 143, 149, 150, 159, 160, 162, 201, 212, 214, 215, 216, 224, 227, 230, 238, 239, 245-65, 269-74, 278, 279, 283, 285, 286, 288, 297, 301  
 Clan 64, 84, 174  
 Clash of Civilizations, the 232, 233, 234, 243  
 Clement of Alexandria 132, 138  
 Cliteur, Paul 17, 18  
 Collective, collectivist 49, 64, 70-3, 79, 85, 92, 172, 181, 270, 273, 274, 276, 281, 283, 284, 286, 301; *see also* Individualistic  
 Colonial 24, 216, 222, 223, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 242, 274, 286  
   Decolonial 215, 226, 228  
   Postcolonial 24, 205, 215, 216, 221, 223, 225, 226  
 Command(ment) 21, 23, 75, 76, 78, 81, 84, 89, 157, 202, 208, 210, 216, 217, 219, 222, 224, 226, 294  
 Communion 101, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 280  
 Community 11, 13, 17, 19-23, 43-60, 64, 66-9, 71, 72, 75, 78, 83-6, 93, 101, 103-5, 113, 120, 123, 128, 129, 133, 136, 137, 140, 144, 145, 149, 155, 160, 163, 168, 177, 179, 180, 183-5, 189, 190, 192, 195, 196, 198, 201-3, 205, 206, 208-14, 223, 229, 231, 236, 239-41, 246, 249  
 Conflict 14, 22, 45, 47, 52, 54, 65, 66, 124, 160, 163, 169-71, 174, 167, 179, 180, 185, 232-4, 239, 240-5, 252, 282, 291, 301  
 Conquest 85, 174, 179, 215-22, 224, 226-8, 235  
 Conservative 40, 48, 56, 87, 89, 149, 248, 251, 256, 258, 260, 263, 270  
 Contextual, contextualize, contextualisation 64, 106, 113, 114, 157, 162, 168, 172, 216, 242, 244, 249, 257, 260, 264, 267, 268, 271, 274, 275, 277, 280, 282, 286, 287, 293  
 Conversion 21, 44, 49, 51, 52, 56, 60, 75, 78, 79, 86, 88, 93, 97, 98, 116, 117, 138, 179, 183, 184, 219, 277-9, 285, 286, 298  
   Convert 9, 43, 49, 93, 96, 138, 159, 179, 184, 185, 198, 203, 217, 219, 235, 278, 299  
   Deconversion 51, 278  
 Cottee, Simon 51, 52, 54, 196  
 Covenant 68, 77, 79, 134, 135, 137, 170, 231, 232, 234-6, 279, 295, 300  
 Covid 19 16, 29-33, 247, 281, 291  
 Create 10, 80, 89, 90, 97, 104, 105, 113, 117, 118, 119, 122, 124, 145, 161, 205, 209, 213, 214, 226, 247, 258, 260, 261, 263, 264, 265, 270, 279-80, 300, 301  
 Creation 16, 237, 264, 273, 279-80, 297  
 Creator(ship) 17, 18, 153, 273, 295, 296  
 Crusades, crusaders 165, 291  
 Cultic 76, 77, 84, 106-9, 111, 122, 153  
 Cultural 22, 38, 43, 46, 49, 55, 57, 59, 60, 62, 65, 67-9, 72, 87, 89, 106, 109, 125-9, 151, 152, 205, 206, 221, 233, 234, 239, 245, 257, 268, 272-4, 278, 281-3, 285, 297, 300  
   Cross-cultural 14  
   Multicultural 43, 55, 57, 60, 205, 274, 278, 282  
 Damned neighbour 10, 17, 20  
 Dār al ḥarb 190  
 Dar al Islam 190  
 Death penalty/sentence 9, 20, 21, 23, 60, 75, 76, 79, 81, 83, 86, 98, 177, 179, 181, 183, 185, 186, 190, 191, 193, 194, 198, 296, 199  
 Decalogue 76, 279  
 Decolonial, decolonization, decolonizing 215, 224, 226, 228, 229, 283, 286  
 Deloria, Vine 222  
 Democracy, democratic 10, 22, 31, 32, 48-50, 55, 56, 58, 167, 176, 278, 282, 286, 301.

- Dialogue, dialogical 23, 34, 35, 37, 38, 65, 67, 90, 149, 161, 202-206, 209, 213, 229, 234, 243, 244, 274, 275, 292, 300
- Discriminate, discrimination 15, 185, 226, 291
- Diverse, diversity 13, 23, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31, 34, 37, 65, 71, 84, 93, 128, 154, 213, 214, 242, 243, 251, 273, 275, 281, 283, 285, 289, 301
- Divine 10, 14, 16-8, 21-23, 45, 61, 103, 109, 118, 121, 133, 144, 168, 191, 196, 207, 212, 213, 218, 273, 290, 292, 295
- Druze 156, 157, 162
- Dualism 18, 19, 60
- Dunn, James 88, 89, 104
- Edna, Chekelelee 225
- Edwards, Jonathan 217, 221
- Egypt, Egyptian 46, 52, 98, 110, 148, 152, 167, 227
- Ehrman, Bart D. 88, 89
- Enlightenment 143, 220
- Enmity 163, 165, 166, 169, 173, 174, 180, 192, 210, 237
- Epistemic, epistemological 12, 14, 26, 30, 31, 34, 35, 37-40, 96, 166, 168, 226, 272
- Ethical, ethics 15, 26, 28, 29, 39, 40, 72, 78, 113, 134, 153, 154, 166, 168, 202, 248, 249, 256, 267, 270
- Ethnic, ethnicity, ethnographic 15, 21, 46, 47, 49, 57, 65, 68, 69, 102, 185, 232, 234-44, 246, 252, 265, 272-4, 278, 281, 282
- Eucharist 20, 140; *see also* Lord's Supper
- European 44-6, 50, 66, 79, 222, 223, 235, 278, 282, 288, 296, 301
- Evangelical 24, 99, 201, 221, 223, 224, 245, 245, 246, 248, 249, 252, 255, 256, 263, 265, 300
- Evil 10, 15, 16, 18, 48, 77, 78, 90, 91, 96, 98, 172, 179, 203, 206, 201, 213, 222, 290, 291, 295, 296
- Exclude, excluding 9, 14-6, 19, 20, 27, 30, 36, 52, 68, 69, 71, 72, 80, 84, 92, 128, 140, 179, 196, 197, 203, 208, 209, 212, 214, 252-256, 262, 271, 280, 285, 289-292, 295, 297; *see also* Include, including
- Exclusion, exclusionary 9, 10, 11, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 52, 59, 61, 66, 68, 71-3, 75, 80, 83-6, 97, 98, 101, 103, 105, 107, 108, 110, 112-3, 115-6, 119, 122, 128, 129, 131, 133, 136, 137, 140, 141, 142-3, 201, 203, 207-9, 211, 214, 215, 223-4, 228-9, 245, 246, 247, 251-4, 262, 264-5, 267-88, 289-91, 295, 298, 299-301
- Exclusive(ness), exclusivity 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 36, 67, 69, 71, 76, 92, 106, 166, 216, 233, 234, 241, 245, 246, 267, 268, 269-71, 273, 275, 278, 283, 285, 287-8, 289, 290, 291, 292, 294, 295, 296
- Exclusivism, exclusivist 9-24, 25-41, 144, 164, 201, 203, 205, 256, 267, 270-1, 280, 289-92, 294
- Excommunicate, excommunication 51, 52, 60, 83, 140, 270
- Exile 23, 78, 84, 87, 89, 93, 95, 97-99, 118, 119, 122, 123, 137
- Expulsion 43, 83
- Extremism, extremist 10-2, 17, 19, 51, 234, 293
- Ezra (person) 78, 84
- Faith 10-2, 14, 19, 20, 34, 37, 43, 44, 60, 62, 66-8, 71, 72, 78, 81, 82, 89, 90, 105, 112, 126, 128, 134, 135, 138, 141, 150, 152, 165-7, 171, 173, 175-80, 184, 186-9, 191, 192, 198, 202, 204, 211, 214, 231, 236, 238, 240, 241, 247, 248, 256, 267-9, 271, 272, 274-277, 280, 282, 283, 285-8, 292, 293, 295, 297, 298, 300, 301
- False, falsehood 15, 29-36, 38-40, 77, 166, 191, 229, 265, 291, 296
- Family 9, 43, 47, 48, 52-7, 64, 68, 69, 84, 85, 118, 102-22, 124, 125, 127, 128, 199, 218, 237, 272, 291, 300
- Fatwa 181
- Fellowship 102, 103, 105-8, 111, 274
- Female 81, 159, 190, 221, 245, 246, 249-53, 256-64, 270
- Feminism, feminist 221, 224, 225, 256
- First nation 216, 217, 221-3, 225-7, 229
- Flusser, David 88, 89
- Food 101-13, 115, 156, 238
- Foreign, foreigners 77, 84, 85, 92, 117, 126, 129, 143, 149, 165, 235
- Forgiveness 22, 97, 98, 138, 175, 192, 210
- Freedom 48, 49, 60, 65, 72, 106, 108, 128, 164, 173, 176, 177, 179, 183, 184, 193, 194, 198, 199, 208, 209, 214, 278, 291, 301
- Friedman, Yohanan 185
- Fundamentalism, fundamentalist 16, 17, 27, 63, 86, 234
- Gender 15, 102, 245, 246, 255, 269, 282, 287
- Generational 283
- Intergenerational 226, 227, 240, 241, 267, 268, 283, 288
- Genocide 19, 215, 216, 219, 221, 222, 226, 227, 229
- Gerstenberger, Erhard S. 84, 86
- God 9, 10, 12-4, 16-20, 23, 26, 28, 40, 41, 46, 51, 53, 56, 67, 76-8, 81, 82, 86, 88, 91-6, 98, 99, 102, 103, 106, 107, 110, 112, 114, 118-25, 127, 131, 133-6, 138-41, 152, 153, 158, 161, 165, 168, 173, 178-80, 188, 189, 202-4, 206, 207-10, 213, 216-8, 220, 222, 225-7, 236, 237-9, 249, 253, 255, 259, 261, 269, 270-4, 276, 278-80, 284, 285-90, 292-7
- Golden calf 82, 279
- Good (opp. to evil) 10, 16, 18, 44, 48, 55, 57, 94, 96, 126, 128, 173, 176, 194, 203, 206, 213, 216, 218, 231, 232, 243, 291, 292
- Government 49, 51, 52, 58, 185, 242, 250
- Grace 85, 96, 99, 122, 125, 135, 295

- Gray, Robert 218  
 Greco-Roman 105, 109, 151  
 Group 9, 15, 16, 18, 22, 26, 38, 44, 45, 47, 50, 51,  
 53, 59, 60, 61-4, 66, 69-71, 72, 79, 84, 87, 92,  
 117-21, 123, 125, 133, 134, 135, 140, 142-4, 145,  
 156, 160, 162, 164, 166, 167, 170, 171, 172, 173,  
 175, 178, 203, 206, 207, 213, 231, 232, 233, 234,  
 237, 238, 239, 243, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250,  
 251, 252-61, 262, 264, 265, 275, 278, 282, 290,  
 293, 299, 301  
 Group boundaries 70, 133, 143, 254  
 Group-oriented 72, 117  
 Ingroup 54, 61-5, 70, 72, 118, 119, 121, 122,  
 124-5, 134, 144, 162, 203, 213, 217, 297  
 Outgroup 61-4, 118, 121, 122-3, 124, 126, 297  
 Gül, Lale 56-7
- Ḥadd, Ḥudūd 183, 196-8  
 Hadith, hadiths 164, 172, 176-8, 186, 188-9,  
 194-5, 197, 202, 204  
 Bukhari, the canonical collection of 177,  
 178, 189, 195, 204  
 Muslim, the canonical collection of 177,  
 178, 189, 204  
 Halachic 89, 95-7, 98, 99, 150, 153, 156, 157  
 Hamidullah, Muhammad 190  
 Hanafi 179, 186, 190  
 Harding, Sarah 102, 103, 109, 110  
 Haslam, S. Alexander 62, 63, 66, 69, 70, 72,  
 246, 247, 252  
 Ḥassan al-Baṣri 186  
 Ḥātib ibn Abi Balta'a 174  
 Heathen 85, 148, 151-2, 217, 219  
 Hebrew Scriptures/Bible 83, 84, 215, 216, 217,  
 293, 296  
 Hell, hellish 220, 282  
 Hellenistic 17, 79, 98  
 Henotheism 86  
 Hermeneutics, hermeneutical 11, 14, 83, 144,  
 163, 168, 215, 216, 217, 223, 227, 229, 260-1,  
 263-5, 270, 272, 279, 280, 286, 287, 289, 293  
 Hibatullah Ibn Salama 175  
 Hiebert, P.G. 298  
 Hierarchy, hierarchies, hierarchical 22, 26,  
 29, 30, 34-5, 367, 38, 255.  
 Hijra 165  
 Holy, holiness 19, 88, 122, 123, 125, 150, 168,  
 298; *see also* Sacred  
 Holy Books / Scriptures / texts 21, 202,  
 203, 209, 211, 289, 292-3, 295  
 Unholy 227  
 Holy Spirit 14, 110, 134, 137, 139, 140, 212, 259  
 Honour 16, 22, 64, 89, 124, 125, 127, 152, 165,  
 170, 171, 175, 180, 225, 241, 254,  
 Dishonouring 23  
 Honour killings / violence 291, 299  
 Horsfjord, Vebjørn L. 203, 204, 205, 206  
 Human rights *see* Rights  
 Hunt, Laura J. 116, 119, 122, 123, 124, 125
- Huntington, Samuel 232, 233, 234, 243  
 Hybridity 65, 87, 91-3, 99, 297
- Ibn 'Abbās 172, 194  
 Ibn al-Humam 179  
 Ibn Kathir 169, 172, 174  
 Ibn Khuzayma 175  
 Ibn Qudāma 193  
 Ibn Taymiyya 177  
 Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī 193  
 Identity, identities 44-5, 46, 47, 49, 50, 55, 57,  
 59, 61-6, 66-8, 68-70, 71-3, 79, 84, 88, 91-3, 99,  
 117, 118-9, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128,  
 143, 144, 162, 206, 220, 235, 236, 238, 241, 244,  
 245, 247, 248-50, 251-2, 254-7, 257-61, 262,  
 264-5, 268, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275-7, 278, 279,  
 281, 282, 283, 284, 287, 290, 294, 296, 297, 300  
 Identify, identification 38, 40, 41, 46, 59,  
 60, 64, 66, 67-8, 72, 88, 106, 107, 108, 132,  
 142, 215, 217, 222, 227, 232, 241, 247, 252,  
 254, 255, 257, 259-61, 262, 264-5, 268-9,  
 270, 275-6, 278, 286, 288, 291,  
 Disidentification 67-8, 264,  
 Social identity (complexity) (theory) *see*  
 Social identity  
 Ideology, ideological 41, 44, 45, 48, 51, 150, 160,  
 166, 216, 233, 237, 267, 268, 272, 277, 281, 282,  
 287, 288  
 Idol(s) 76, 98, 106, 108, 111, 147, 151, 152, 153,  
 154, 159,  
 Idolators 19, 104, 295  
 Idolatrous, idolatry 23, 76, 77, 81, 103, 104,  
 105, 107, 108, 112, 118, 147-62, 185, 218, 219,  
 279, 295, 296  
 Ijmā' 193  
 'Ikrimah 194  
 Imam Abū Ḥanīfa 190  
 Imam al-Shāfi'i 190  
 Imam ibn Ḥanbal 190  
 Imam Mālik 178, 190  
 Imperialism, imperialist 26, 29, 33, 140, 205,  
 223  
 Include, including 14, 29, 37, 45, 50, 54, 55, 57,  
 58, 68-71, 72, 76, 84, 86, 88, 92, 93, 105, 124,  
 151, 153, 154, 159, 163, 164, 166, 167, 175-6, 180,  
 183, 189, 197, 198, 205, 209, 212, 213, 214, 227,  
 228, 229, 235, 237, 245, 247, 248, 250, 253,  
 254, 256, 258, 261, 262-3, 269, 271, 280, 281,  
 286, 296; *see also* Exclude, excluding  
 Inclusion, inclusionary 9, 11-6, 19, 20, 21-2,  
 23-4, 27-8, 59, 61, 66, 68-71, 72-3, 75, 80,  
 84, 85, 86, 97, 101, 103, 105, 107, 108, 110,  
 112-3, 115-6, 129, 140, 201, 205, 211, 212, 213,  
 214, 224, 241, 245, 246, 252, 253, 254, 256,  
 262-5, 267-8, 269-71, 271-2, 273, 274-7,  
 278, 279, 280-2, 283-4, 285-7, 288, 289,  
 290-2, 294, 295, 298, 299-301  
 Inclusive(ness), inclusivity, inclusivistic 9,  
 10, 11-6, 17, 18, 22, 25-6, 65, 68-71, 72, 92,

- 93, 96, 129, 174, 203, 205-7, 211, 213-4, 231, 234, 241, 243, 246, 252, 267-8, 269-71, 271, 273, 283, 285, 287-8, 289, 291-2, 295
- Inclusivism 9, 10, 11-6, 24, 27, 203, 214, 270, 271, 292
- Individual 21, 44-5, 46, 47, 48-9, 50, 51, 52, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61-5, 66-8, 70, 71, 72, 79, , 129, 148, 152-3, 189, 247, 251, 252, 257, 260, 261, 264, 265, 269, 274, 276, 279, 280, 281-2, 284, 286, 287, 290, 293, 300, 301
- Individualism 60, 281, 285,
- Individualist, individualistic 22, 71, 73, 128, 300, 301; *see also* Collectivistic
- Individualization, individualize 70, 72, 281, 284, 285,
- Inside, insider 13, 99, 112, 113, 118-9, 121, 123-4, 124-7, 131, 133, 134, 136, 141, 143, 144, 145, 149, 206, 296; *see also* *Outside, outsider*
- Internetization 267, 268, 284, 288
- Intolerance, intolerant 10, 16-7, 22, 214, 233
- ISIS 41, 51, 165, 175, 293
- Islam, islamic 9, 11, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 49, 51, 56, 60, 66, 67, 149, 152, 156, 157, 158, 162, 163-81, 183-99, 202-3, 204, 205, 207, 211, 232-4, 237-8, 239, 276, 277, 278, 283, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 299, 300
- Un-islamic 50
- Anti-islamic 166, 299
- Isnad 194
- Israel, Israelite 19, 68, 69, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 82, 84, 85, 86, 92, 93, 95, 98, 104, 105, 107, 119, 120, 123, 133, 144, 147, 148, 149, 151, 152, 156, 157, 158, 160, 162, 167, 216, 217, 218, 227, 294
- Non-Israelite 85, 224
- Iwamony, Rachel 238, 241, 242
- Jacob 19, 148, 222
- Jamaa'ah 191
- Jehovah's Witnesses 50
- Jenkins, Richard 61, 66, 72, 246
- Jerusalem 78, 88, 116, 149, 150, 226
- New Jerusalem 221
- Jesus 12, 14, 21, 28, 69, 77, 82, 87-99, 115, 116, 125, 129, 134, 139, 140, 153, 157, 159, 202, 204, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 223, 224, 225, 237, 239, 261, 264, 273, 290, 294, 295, 297, 298; *see also* Christ; *see also* Son of God
- Jethro 85, 148
- Jews, Jewish 17, 21, 23, 51, 75, 84, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 96, 108, 119, 123, 127, 134, 137, 141, 142, 144, 147, 148, 149, 151, 153, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 165, 167, 171, 185, 206, 207, 208, 209, 248, 275, 276, 277, 293, 295, 299
- Non-Jews, non-Jewish 116, 153, 160, 161,
- Jewish-Christian tradition 206
- Jihad, (ex-)jihadi 9, 18, 173, 233
- Jobes, Karen 120
- John Chrysostom 140-1
- John the Baptist 96
- Johnston, David 168
- Jonah (person) 85
- Josephus 98, 148
- Joshua (person) 218
- Judaism 11, 19, 98, 116, 145, 147, 149, 150, 152, 154, 156, 161, 177, 184, 185, 290, 292, 293, 295, 299
- Judge, judgement 62, 63, 68, 76, 77, 79, 81, 83, 95, 135, 138, 140, 143, 152, 197, 206, 255, 296
- Judgement of God, divine judgement, eternal / final judgement 10, 133, 135, 136, 188, 210, 293, 295, 296
- Jurisprudence, jurisprudential 164, 176, 184, 190, 196, 197, 198, 278,
- Justice, justify, justification 38-9, 39, 82, 86, 128, 140, 163, 164, 166, 168, 172, 175, 179, 180, 190, 192, 195, 202, 208, 211, 228, 276, 290, 291, 293, 295, 300, 301,
- Justificationist (philosophical) 25, 37-9, 40
- Injustice 195, 293, 295
- Unjustifiability 27
- Kach 293
- Kamali, Mohammed Hashim 177, 197
- King James I 218
- Kingdom 88, 90
- Kingdom of God 91, 95, 96, 139, 249, 294
- Kinship 47, 120, 123, 124, 126, 127, 173, 238, 240, 243
- Kufr 51, 165, 189
- Lapsi 20, 135, 143, 297
- Larsson, Göran 277
- Laws, lawful 12, 16, 17, 20, 44, 45, 46, 51, 75, 78, 79, 82, 84, 89, 90, 91, 106, 118, 135, 139, 143, 151, 152, 154, 157, 167, 173, 185, 186, 190, 191, 196, 219, 222, 241, 243, 279, 287, 293, 294, 295, 296, 299
- Lingsma, Tjitske 242
- Loneliness 267, 268, 281-2, 283, 299
- Lord 96, 102, 103, 106, 108, 110, 111, 113, 114, 133, 135, 138, 139, 140, 141, 153, 173, 193, 194, 204, 207-10, 218, 295
- Lord's Army 293
- Lord's supper 20, 101, 111, 114, 269; *see also* Eucharist
- Love 10, 21, 54, 81, 82, 91, 120, 124-7, 128, 164-5, 166, 170, 173, 174, 175, 178, 180, 187, 202, 203-4, 208, 210, 211, 216, 217, 269, 270, 279, 284, 294, 295, 296, 297
- Loyal, loyalty, loyalties 47, 48, 49, 54, 57, 163-81, 191, 241, 301
- Disloyal, disloyalty 163, 164, 167, 169, 171, 174, 176-80, 192
- Luther, Martin 81, 82, 132
- Maimonides 83, 152
- Majority 56, 58, 70, 79, 93, 116, 149, 152, 155, 183, 185, 186, 188, 189, 190, 198, 208, 231, 232, 239, 243, 249, 251, 254, 255, 259, 271, 290, 296

- Malherbe, Abraham 126, 127
- Margin, marginal, marginalize 63, 68, 88, 117, 128, 226, 252, 254, 272, 273-4
- Meal 84, 101, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 114, 274
- Mecca, Meccans 51, 173, 174, 179, 186
- Medina 163, 167, 171, 172, 179, 180, 194, 195, 209
- Meier, John P. 88, 89, 90, 91
- Messianic Jews, Jewish followers of Jesus 92, 158, 162
- Michaels, Ramsey 117, 127
- Middle East, Middle Eastern 46, 57, 294, 296
- Migrants, migrate, migration 65, 158, 282, 283, 286, 291
- Emigrate, emigration 165, 170, 171, 172
- Immigrants, immigration 56, 239, 267, 268, 281, 283, 288
- Minority, minorities 22, 49, 56, 57, 185, 239, 254, 259, 290, 291
- Mishnah 80, 151, 155
- Mishnah Sanhedrin 79, 80
- Missiology, missiological 11, 12, 24, 215, 220, 225, 226, 228, 267, 272, 273, 279, 286, 289
- Theology-missiology 268, 272, 273, 274, 276, 279-80, 281-2, 284, 286, 288
- Mission, missional 94, 96, 122, 125, 126, 127, 215, 220, 223, 225, 226, 228, 229, 260, 273, 274, 280, 286, 288
- Moluccan, Moluccas 24, 228, 231-44, 300
- Monotheism, monotheistic 9, 10, 11, 16-8, 19, 20, 21, 78, 86, 92, 93, 96, 108, 109, 152, 153, 156, 166, 172, 210, 231, 275, 295, 296
- Moral, morality 10, 26, 30, 33, 34, 35, 38, 43-58, 59, 60, 90, 122, 127, 129, 147-8, 151, 153, 216, 220, 274
- Immoral 32, 48, 50, 51, 104
- Moses 82, 85, 104, 135, 139, 144, 148, 195
- Mosque 66, 159, 185, 186, 238
- Mu'adh ibn Jabal 177
- Muḥammad, the prophet 14, 16, 51, 163, 166, 167, 172, 173, 174, 178, 179, 180, 183, 184, 186, 187, 188, 189, 193, 194, 195, 204, 207, 209, 210, 214, 290
- Messenger 14, 165, 173, 177, 180, 187, 290
- 188, 189, 194, 195, 198, 204, 210, 214, 290
- Muhammad al-Ghazali 195
- Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī 190
- Muhammad Muḥiy al-Din al-Masiri 195
- Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid 191-2
- Muir, Steven 142, 143, 144
- Mulder, Anne-Claire 253, 255, 256, 260, 263
- Multicultural 43, 55, 57, 60, 205, 274, 278, 282
- Multireligious 11, 60, 153, 205, 268, 278, 282, 289, 299
- Muqatil Ibn Suleyman Al-Balkhi 175
- Murtadd 184, 185, 193
- Muslim, the canonical collection of 177, 178, 189, 204
- Muslim 9, 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 26, 46, 48, 51, 52, 56, 60, 66, 67, 70, 113, 150, 158, 163-81, 183-99, 201-14, 217, 231-2, 232-4, 235, 237-8, 239, 240, 242, 243-4, 269, 275, 276, 278, 279, 291, 294, 297, 301
- Muslim community 56, 67, 177, 195, 196, 211, 213
- Muslim convert/apostate, ex-Muslim 51, 183-99, 278, 297, 299, 301
- Muslim scholars 20, 23, 60, 165, 167, 168, 183-99, 241,
- Non-Muslim 163, 164, 166, 167, 169, 175, 180, 185, 191
- Naastepad, Th.J.M. 82
- Nation state 48, 167, 233, 278
- Nationalism 156, 160-1, 162
- Native 68, 174, 215-29, 232, 269, 281
- Negotiate, negotiation 12, 17, 59, 61, 63, 65, 101, 102, 103, 107, 110, 111, 112, 113, 128, 155, 156, 206, 224, 244, 259, 264, 265, 272, 273, 278, 283
- Nehemiah (person) 78
- Neopythagoreans 127
- Netherlands, the 9, 15, 24, 49, 50, 51, 56, 227-8, 235, 245, 246, 247, 248, 250, 268, 274, 277, 278, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 288, 291, 294, 296, 299
- New Religious Movements 60
- Niebuhr, Richard 116, 128
- Nigeria 185
- Norm 22, 43, 44-6, 47, 48-9, 49-50, 53, 55, 57, 129, 143, 153, 155, 252, 261, 290, 292, 293
- Normative 13, 24, 45, 78, 95, 167, 205, 221, 224, 261, 264, 282
- North Korea 297
- Nostra Aetate 149
- Nunusaku 231, 236, 237, 238, 240
- O'Grady, Selina 16-7
- Oecumenius 141-2
- Ohorella, M.G. 242
- Ontological 30, 272, 273
- Oppress, oppression, oppressor 19, 26, 129, 172, 211, 222, 227, 229
- Origen 131, 138-40,
- Orthodox, orthodoxy 14, 17, 52, 147, 149, 150, 154, 157, 161, 162, 167, 212, 213, 233, 239, 248, 273, 299
- Ostracism 50, 52
- Othering 136, 144, 145, 201, 203, 205-6, 213, 295
- Otherness 11, 23, 25, 26, 35, 86, 87, 93, 94, 97, 99, 129, 163, 206, 274
- Religious other 10, 13, 23, 25, 26, 27, 149, 162, 201, 203, 205, 206, 207, 210, 211, 213, 214, 267, 294
- Outside, outsider 13, 19, 24, 46, 50, 61, 62, 63, 69, 77, 84, 86, 87, 94-95, 97, 98, 99, 112, 113, 115, 117, 122, 123, 124-7, 131, 134, 137, 141, 145, 152, 157, 206, 212, 213, 240, 242, 290, 300, 301; *see also* Inside, insider

- Pagan 46, 106, 112, 119, 120, 123, 126, 142, 148,  
151, 158, 173, 174, 179, 186, 217
- Pakistan 51, 232
- Palestine, Palestinian 87, 88, 148
- Parable 87-99
- Pardue, Crystal 222, 299
- Particularity 11, 13-4, 18, 170, 271
- Pashtun 46
- Paul, Pauline 20, 23, 61, 101-14, 117, 131, 132, 134,  
136, 139, 264, 294
- Peace, peaceful 10, 18, 22, 23, 62, 175, 197, 202,  
203, 210, 211, 216, 217, 225, 231, 232, 234, 235,  
237, 238, 241, 242, 243, 244, 284, 292, 295
- Pela 228, 231-244, 300  
Panas Pela 232, 241  
Pela gandong 242  
Hard pela 235, 238, 242  
Soft pela 235
- People of other faiths 267, 268, 274, 276, 277,  
282, 287, 288
- Persecute, persecution 17, 20, 21, 116, 122, 124,  
128, 143, 166, 179, 186, 214, 248, 270, 278, 297
- Peter (person) 115, 116, 117, 139
- Philo of Alexandria 104, 127, 148
- Philosophical, philosophy 21, 22, 23, 26, 27,  
29, 32, 37, 38, 45, 46, 96, 127, 151, 152, 234,  
273, 277
- Physical 34, 101, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 110,  
111, 112, 113, 151, 155, 164, 282, 293,  
Metaphysical 103, 112, 236
- Plantinga, Alvin 27, 29
- Pluralism, pluralist(ic) 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 26, 27,  
28, 35, 60, 65, 129, 167, 175, 180, 203, 205, 206,  
271, 276
- Polarize, polarization 10, 231, 232, 265, 276,  
278, 282, 284
- Political , politician, politics 17, 26, 31, 32,  
44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 51, 52, 56, 60, 63, 70, 71, 72,  
85, 150, 151, 157, 163, 167, 168, 170, 176, 177, 179,  
180, 181, 183, 190, 192, 198, 202, 208, 232, 233,  
239, 240, 241, 244, 268, 272, 277, 282, 284,  
285, 286, 299
- Polytheism, polytheist 17, 108, 157, 172, 173, 179
- Postcolonial 24, 205, 206, 215, 216, 220, 221,  
223, 225, 226; *see also* Colonial
- Postmodern, postmodernist 14, 31, 37, 60,  
69, 71
- Poverty 280, 281, 282
- Promised land 85, 110, 148, 216, 221, 227
- Prophet, prophetic, prophecy 45, 76, 77, 85,  
88, 91, 92, 96, 148, 166, 184, 286, 214, 293, 296  
Prophet Muhammad, *see*: Muhammad
- Proposition, propositional 14, 29, 33, 36, 40,  
87, 90, 168, 265
- Proselytize 185
- Protestant, protestantism 46, 56, 79, 149, 154,  
248, 283
- Prototype, prototypical 62, 63, 71, 72, 118, 125,  
252, 255
- Providence 217-8
- Punish, punishment 10, 19, 20, 23, 43, 47, 51,  
47, 58, 75, 81, 82, 83, 91, 97, 98, 134, 135, 136,  
139, 150, 170, 176, 177, 178, 179, 183, 184, 185,  
186-98, 199, 232, 241, 279, 291, 293, 295
- Q (source) 93, 94, 95, 96
- Qanon 31
- Qumran 86, 136
- Qur'ān 14, 51, 52, 60, 68, 164, 166, 168, 169, 172,  
174, 176, 177, 183, 184, 186, 187, 188, 193, 194,  
196, 197, 198, 199, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206,  
207, 208, 209, 211, 212, 214, 291, 294
- Qutb, Sayyid 192
- Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba 152
- Rabbi Yoḥanan 152
- Rabbinic 23, 75, 79, 80, 90, 90, 98, 136, 147, 148,  
150-2, 152, 154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 161, 162, 277
- Racial 228, 273
- Racism, racist 219, 272, 274, 286
- Radical, radicalize 9, 10, 16, 86, 234, 293
- Rahab 85, 86
- Rajas 235
- Ravensberger, Jeff 32
- Receptions, reception history 23, 75, 79, 82,  
113, 131, 133, 137, 222, 299
- Reconquista 21
- Reformation 79, 80
- Relation, relationship 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22,  
23, 45, 46, 47, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 65, 66,  
67, 69, 70, 71, 85, 101, 105, 107, 110, 111, 112, 115,  
116, 120, 124, 126, 128, 135, 145, 153, 156, 162,  
163, 164, 175-6, 180, 185, 202, 205, 231, 232,  
233, 235, 237, 238, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245,  
247, 248, 251, 252, 255, 256, 258, 260, 269,  
270, 271, 276, 277, 278, 279, 281, 285, 289, 290,  
292, 293, 301
- Relational 12, 15, 110, 248, 255, 258, 260, 279,  
280  
Inter-relational 269, 271, 273, 274, 276, 277,  
283, 287
- Relativism 26, 37, 39
- Religion, religions 9-24, 25-41, 43-58, 59-73,  
75, 76, 78, 79, 81, 82, 149, 151, 152, 154, 156-8,  
162, 164, 165, 167, 171, 172, 175, 177, 179, 183-5,  
186, 188, 189, 191, 192, 193, 194, 198-9, 205,  
208, 210, 211, 214, 226, 231, 232, 234, 236,  
237-8, 243, 251, 274-7, 280-1, 282, 284, 285,  
288, 291-2, 293, 295, 296, 299
- Religious 9-24, 25-41, 43-58, 59-73, 80, 82, 87,  
89, 92, 147-162, 164, 167, 169, 172, 173, 176, 185,  
196, 201, 202-3, 205-7, 208-9, 210, 211, 213, 214,  
216, 218, 224, 231, 239-40, 241, 243, 244, 245,  
247, 252, 253, 255, 256, 257, 259, 267, 268,  
272, 275-7, 278, 281, 283, 284, 285-7, 289-301  
Interreligious 35, 37, 61, 67, 113, 163, 174,  
180, 185, 205-6, 235, 242, 274, 300, 301  
Intra-religious 167

- Multireligious 11, 60, 153, 205, 268, 278, 282, 289, 299  
 Socio-religious 59, 66, 67, 68, 70, 147, 151, 152, 157, 161, 246-7, 252, 264, 283,  
 Religious/theological exclusivism / exclu-  
 sion 9, 10, 11, 15, 20, 23, 25-30, 33-6, 39,  
 40, 73, 256, 267-71, 280, 283, 284, 287-8,  
 289-92, 298  
 Religious/theological inclusivism /  
 inclusion 11, 73, 271, 283, 284, 291  
 Religious other *see* Otherness  
 Trans-religious 167, 180  
 Repent, repentance 20, 98, 132, 134, 135, 138,  
 140, 141, 142, 152, 159, 178, 179, 181, 186, 187,  
 193, 197, 210, 297  
 Responsa 147, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 161, 162,  
 Responsa Project, the 154-5  
 Reveal 12, 28, 76, 95, 122, 164, 168, 174, 175, 210  
 Revelation 10, 12, 13, 14, 17, 28, 45, 51, 52, 164,  
 168, 169, 171, 173, 174, 175, 180, 207, 220, 292,  
 293, 294  
 Revolt Terror Group 293  
 Ridda 163, 164, 176, 179, 180, 184, 189, 197  
 Rights 15, 16, 301  
     Human rights 60, 183, 198  
 Risch, Christina 103, 109  
 Rite, ritual 13, 48, 49, 56, 57, 88, 103, 104, 135,  
 141, 148, 152, 223, 232, 236, 287, 297  
 Roman 17, 79, 95, 98, 102, 105, 109, 116, 123, 150,  
 151, 223  
 Roman Catholic 67, 79, 223, 250, 269  
 Rorty, Richard 31  
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 10, 17, 20, 292  
 Rushdie, Salman 20, 51  
 Russia 165, 293, 296  
 Ruth (person) 85, 86, 93, 148, 224  
  
 Sacks, Jonathan 18-9, 290, 295  
 Sacred 59, 62, 66, 68, 69, 71, 168, 186, 202, 203,  
 205, 214, 223, 240, 246, 247; *see also* Holy  
 Salafi, Salafism 17, 165, 166, 169, 173  
 Salvation 11, 12-4, 15, 16, 20, 22, 25, 28, 88, 121,  
 133, 134, 135, 140, 238, 270, 275, 290  
 Saming 201, 203, 205, 206, 214, 294, 300  
 Samson, Jane 220  
 Saudi 197, 299  
 Save (verb) 12, 13, 14, 28, 79-80, 85, 190, 213,  
 222, 269, 275, 297  
 Saviour 12, 237, 269  
 Scheffler, Eben 83  
 Scriptural reasoning 204  
 Second Temple period/era 79, 82, 147, 148,  
 150, 161  
 Secret Believers 297-8  
 Secular, secularization 43, 46, 51, 57, 96, 149,  
 154, 160, 161, 215, 217, 219, 278, 279, 285, 300,  
 301  
 Septuagint 86, 120, 132  
 Shaikh Aḥmad Ibrāhīm 192  
 Shari'a 16, 168, 184, 185, 186, 188, 193, 197, 198,  
 278  
 Shiite 51, 67, 232  
 Shoah 145, 149, 155, 156, 159, 160, 161, 162  
 Similiarities 61, 62, 64, 202, 205, 206, 237, 251  
 Sin 81, 82, 98, 109, 134, 135, 136, 138, 139, 140,  
 141, 159, 186, 188, 212, 267, 269, 270, 271, 272,  
 278, 279, 280, 281, 296, 297  
     Sinner 38, 137, 138, 140, 161, 213, 269, 270  
 Sinai 110, 134  
 Sioux 222  
 Sir Walter Raleigh 216  
 Siyār 190  
 Slavery 227, 272, 286, 293  
 Social Contract, the 10  
 Social, socially 11, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 43,  
 44-5, 46-7, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 60-1, 64, 65, 66,  
 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 71, 72, 84, 86, 89, 90, 93, 96,  
 101, 102, 107, 108, 109, 11, 112, 115, 117, 119, 125,  
 126, 129, 132, 142, 143, 150, 153, 154, 157, 163,  
 167, 185, 192, 195-6, 198, 202, 205, 233, 234,  
 239, 251, 252, 255, 257, 261, 262, 269, 270, 272,  
 273, 276, 277, 280-1, 283, 284, 286, 289-92,  
 299,  
 Social identity 47, 59, 61-66, 66-8, 68-70,  
 71-3, 115-6, 124, 125, 142, 245, 246-7, 251-2,  
 259, 263, 290, 296; *see also* Identity  
     Social identity complexity 23, 117, 123  
     Social identity theory 23, 59, 115, 116,  
         117, 121, 122, 131, 133, 142, 246, 254, 290  
 Social inclusion / inclusivism 9, 10, 15, 25,  
 26, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 274, 280, 283,  
 284, 287-8, 289-92, 298  
 Social exclusion / exclusivism 9, 20, 52,  
 68, 196, 267, 268, 271, 280-1, 288, 291, 299  
 Socio-cognitive 119, 122, 124  
 Socio-cultural 89, 125  
 Socioeconomic 68, 69  
 Sociological 22, 66, 88, 272, 290, 297,  
 Socio-political 163, 168, 179, 180, 198, 268,  
 272, 277, 285, 286  
 Socio-religious 59, 66, 67, 68, 70, 147, 151,  
 152, 157, 161, 246, 247, 252, 264, 283  
 Society 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 31, 32, 43, 55, 56,  
 57, 58, 59, 64, 65, 69, 70, 77, 78, 83, 84, 85, 96,  
 105, 111, 123, 127, 149, 154, 191, 192, 193, 195,  
 196, 198, 206, 208, 234, 245, 252, 261, 268,  
 269, 274, 277, 281, 282, 283, 284, 286, 288,  
 290, 291, 292, 301  
 Societal 48, 245, 246, 261, 263, 268, 276,  
 280, 282, 283  
 Son of God 14, 23, 88, 134, 135, 138, 139, 140,  
 209, 290, 295; *see also* Christ; *see also* Jesus  
 Sospelisa, Hermien 239, 240, 241  
 Speech act 90, 205  
 Spiritual, spirituality 83, 96, 98, 104, 107, 111,  
 112, 121, 126, 131, 280, 286, 287, 288, 293  
 Spivak, Gayatri 205  
 Stereotyping, stereotypically 63, 123, 257

- Stigma, stigmatize, stigmatization 43, 51, 53,  
54, 55, 57, 63, 68, 71, 291
- Still, Todd D. 120, 121
- Stone, stoning, throw a stone 19, 54, 77, 81, 82,  
83, 85, 226, 229, 293, 295, 296
- Stranger 68, 84, 95, 99, 117, 143
- Suffer, suffering 95, 116, 122, 124, 125, 128, 141,  
188, 229
- Sufyān al-Thawrī 193
- Sunnah 164, 168, 176, 177, 186, 188, 193, 197, 294
- Sunni, Sunnite 20, 51, 169, 190, 232
- Superior, superiority 25, 29, 39, 40, 55, 121, 123
- Switch 39, 40, 43, 55, 57, 58, 64, 70, 184, 227
- Syncretism 231, 237
- Tafsir 163, 169, 201, 207, 208, 209
- Takfīr 51
- Talmud 80, 98, 150, 152, 154, 155, 158
- Tamar 221
- Tanakh 19, 20, 75, 83, 85, 86
- Targumic 92, 136
- Tawhīd 166, 204, 208,
- Ṭāwūs 186
- Temple 78, 79, 82, 88, 89, 91, 92, 105, 116, 132,  
147, 148, 150, 159, 161
- Terrorism, terrorist 9, 17, 234
- Tertullian 82
- Texts, textual 11, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 51, 59, 62,  
66, 68, 69, 71, 75, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84,  
85, 86, 87, 95, 98, 112-3, 115, 116, 119, 120, 125,  
127, 131, 132, 133, 136, 137, 139, 142, 149, 154-5,  
157, 161-2, 163, 164, 166, 168, 174, 177, 201-14,  
216, 217, 218, 220, 221-2, 223, 226, 227, 228,  
229, 246, 247, 255, 256, 260, 261, 263, 268,  
274-5, 276, 278, 279, 287, 289, 291, 292-3, 296,  
297, 298, 300
- Exclusive / exclusionary texts 9, 11, 22, 23,  
69, 133, 141, 201, 203, 207, 209, 211, 212,  
215, 216, 229, 290, 292, 294, 296
- Inclusive / inclusionary texts 211, 212, 214
- Texts of terror 221, 228
- Theocratic 294, 301
- Theodoret of Cyr 141
- Theologia religionum 13, 275, 276
- Theology, theologian, theological 10, 11, 12, 13,  
14, 23, 24, 28, 38, 40, 60, 61, 67, 68, 70, 73, 75,  
78, 84, 88, 101, 103, 111, 112, 124, 127, 131, 140,  
142, 145, 147, 149, 151, 152, 156, 157, 158, 162,  
163, 167, 168, 176, 180-1, 184, 202, 214, 215, 216,  
217, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223-4, 225, 226, 227,  
228, 229, 246, 249, 250, 251, 253, 255, 260,  
263, 267-88, 289-92, 301
- Theology missiology 267, 268, 272, 273,  
274, 276, 279-80, 281-2, 284, 286, 288; *see*  
*also* Missiology
- Theology of religions 13, 14, 274, 277, 288
- Theophylact of Ohrid 212
- Tolerance, tolerant 17, 49, 60, 67, 150, 163, 174,  
175, 177
- Tolerate 16, 18, 32, 176, 185, 265
- Tomson, Peter 89
- Torah 84, 132, 134, 136, 154, 158
- Tradition, traditions 9, 11, 13, 14, 21, 22, 23, 34,  
40, 41, 60, 67, 68, 71, 75, 77, 80, 83, 87, 96, 101,  
104, 105, 108, 137, 138, 140, 144, 148, 149, 152,  
164, 167, 175, 196, 205, 206, 207, 214, 217, 228,  
236, 237, 239, 240, 243, 245, 255, 256, 257,  
263, 272, 275, 276, 277, 278, 286, 292, 293,  
294, 295, 296, 299, 300
- Traditional 17, 20, 152, 168, 169, 207, 208, 231,  
232, 237, 238, 240, 243, 257, 263, 291, 300, 301
- Traditionalism, traditionalist 16, 17, 169
- Transgression 53, 59, 61, 66, 68, 78, 85, 133
- Travis, J.J. 297
- Tribe, tribal 18, 22, 46, 84, 85, 97, 164, 167, 179,  
199, 218
- Trible, Phyllis 221, 222
- Trinity 14, 152, 153, 203
- Troeltsch, Ernst 128
- Trump, Donald 31, 32
- Truth 9, 10, 12, 14-7, 20, 25-41, 78, 128, 135, 138,  
140, 173, 191, 194, 195, 209, 210, 226, 242, 256,  
259, 261, 265, 271, 282, 287, 290
- Turkey, Turkish, Turks 46, 56, 232, 281
- Uhud, battle of 170
- Ummah 51, 165, 167, 301
- Unbelievers 165, 170, 172, 177, 178, 189, 203,  
209, 210, 298; *see also* Believers
- United States 234, 291
- Unity 22, 143, 179, 202, 203, 204, 208, 232, 243,  
259, 260,
- Universal 13, 14, 18, 22, 227, 261, 295,
- Values 22, 32, 36, 37, 44, 45, 46, 62, 65, 68, 70,  
78, 124, 125, 126, 127, 129, 167, 180, 234, 252,  
257, 259, 261, 263, 282, 292, 300
- Vattimo, Giovanni 31
- Vermes, Géza 88
- Violence, violent 10, 17, 18, 19, 24, 57, 63, 68, 71,  
83, 124, 125, 128, 179, 215, 222, 226, 233, 239,  
240, 275, 282, 285, 292, 293, 295, 299
- Volf, Miroslav 11, 115, 116, 128-9, 202
- Wahhabi, Wahhabism 165, 166
- Walā' 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 171, 174,  
176, 180; *see also* barā'
- Walters, Jason J. 9, 10, 292
- Warrior, Robert Allen 217, 227
- Webb, Natalie R. 120, 121
- Western 46, 49, 57, 59, 60, 72, 73, 79, 160, 162,  
168, 216, 220, 224, 233, 274, 285, 301
- Whitaker, Alexander 218
- White 46, 219, 225, 228
- Wilderness 108, 110, 219, 220
- Witness (verb) 40, 41, 81, 93, 125, 127, 169, 187,  
207, 209, 229, 232, 236, 299
- Witness(es) 76-7, 79-84, 89, 117, 135-7, 144, 296



- Woman, women 24, 81, 84, 85, 125, 126, 127,  
 174, 179, 190, 209, 225, 245-65, 269, 270, 272,  
 274, 300  
 Word of God 134, 292  
 Worldview 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 24,  
 26, 160, 167, 174, 219, 221, 225, 231, 232, 276,  
 282, 290  
 Worship, worshipper 76-7, 78, 81, 86, 98, 105,  
 106, 108, 147-8, 151-4, 159, 161, 173, 174, 184, 186,  
 196, 207-10, 217-20, 226, 229, 248, 260, 268  
 Wright, Tom 88, 89  
 Xenophobia 84, 274  
 YHWH 76, 77, 78, 84, 85, 86, 136  
 Zāhir 189  
 Zayd, Mustapha 176  
 Zionism 147, 160, 161, 162

# Index of Manuscripts

## Biblical texts

Genesis, book of	18, 19, 85, 148	Deuteronomy 17:1-7	81
Genesis 9	219	Deuteronomy 17:2	77
Genesis 9:25	219	Deuteronomy 17:2-7	19, 21, 23, 68, 75, 76, 78, 82, 86, 94, 219
Genesis 23:7-18	148	Deuteronomy 17:4	77
Genesis 35:1-4	148	Deuteronomy 17:6	76, 132, 136
Exodus 12:45	84	Deuteronomy 17:7	77, 78, 81
Exodus 17	104	Deuteronomy 17:8	76
Exodus 19:5-6, 10-14	122	Deuteronomy 17:8-13	76
Exodus 20:4	76	Deuteronomy 17:12	77, 78
Exodus 20:12	89	Deuteronomy 17:14-20	76
Exodus 21:12	296	Deuteronomy 18:1-8	76
Exodus 21:15	296	Deuteronomy 18:9-22	76
Exodus 21:16	296	Deuteronomy 19:15	77, 82, 136
Exodus 21:17	296	Deuteronomy 19:19	77, 78
Exodus 22:17	81	Deuteronomy 19:20	78
Exodus 22:19	296	Deuteronomy 21	78
Exodus 22:20	76	Deuteronomy 22	78
Exodus 29:33	84	Deuteronomy 21:21	78
Exodus 31:15	296	Deuteronomy 22:22-24	78
Exodus 32	104	Deuteronomy 23:20	84
Exodus 32:6	104	Deuteronomy 24:7	78
Leviticus 18:3	148	Deuteronomy 29:25/26	77
Leviticus 19:17,18	204	Deuteronomy 31:12	84
Leviticus 20:2	296	Deuteronomy 32:8	86
Leviticus 20:11-12	296	Deuteronomy 32:35-36	132, 136
Leviticus 20:13	296	Deuteronomy 33:2	134
Leviticus 20:27	81	Joshua, book of	85, 139, 221, 227
Numbers 20	104	Joshua 17:14	218
Numbers 25	85, 104	Judges 1:16	148
Deuteronomy, book of	68, 69, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 131, 133, 135, 136, 144, 227, 293	Ruth, book of	85, 93, 224
Deuteronomy 4:15	76	1 Kings	148
Deuteronomy 4:19	76, 86	2 Kings	148
Deuteronomy 5:8	76	2 Kings 17:24-40	84
Deuteronomy 12-26	78	2 Kings 23:4	78
Deuteronomy 12:29-13:1	76	2 Chronicles 29:16	78
Deuteronomy 13	19, 76	Ezra, book of	84
Deuteronomy 13:2-19	76	Ezra 4:2	84
Deuteronomy 13:5	296	Ezra 9:1-15	85
Deuteronomy 13:6	77, 78	Ezra 10	84
Deuteronomy 14:21	84	Nehemiah, book of	84
Deuteronomy 16-18	83	Nehemiah 9	85
Deuteronomy 16:13-15	68	Psalms 34:8	120
Deuteronomy 16:18	76	Proverbs 2:16	84
Deuteronomy 16:18-20	68	Isaiah, book of	92, 148
Deuteronomy 16:18-17:7	82	Isaiah 1:7	84
Deuteronomy 16:21-17:1	76	Isaiah 3:18-24	127
Deuteronomy 16:21-17:7	76	Isaiah 9:1	97
Deuteronomy 17	23, 69, 75, 81, 85, 86, 219, 223, 226, 227, 228, 229, 268, 291, 293, 294, 295, 296, 299	Isaiah 35:1	220
		Isaiah 40:6-8	120
		Jeremiah, book of	148
		Jeremiah 15:6	139

Jeremiah 44	81	Luke 9:57-62	94
Ezekiel, book of	148	Luke 9:62	139
Ezekiel 34:10, 23	92	Luke 10:27	204
Hosea, book of	148	Luke 11:23	211
Amos, book of	148	Luke 12:10	137
Jonah, book of	85	Luke 13:18-19	91
Jonah 1:14	85	Luke 13:20-21	96
Nahum, book of	85	Luke 13:28-30	95
Zachariah, book of	92	Luke 14:15-24	91
Malachi, book of	93	Luke 14:16-24	93
Matthew, book of	91, 93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 139, 224	Luke 14:21-24	94
Matthew 1:1-17	93	Luke 17:3-4	98
Matthew 5:44	21	Luke 19:11-27	91
Matthew 8:11-12	95	Luke 19:12-27	96
Matthew 8:19-22	94	Luke 19:27	97
Matthew 11:16-19	94	Luke 20:9-19	91
Matthew 12	212, 214	Luke 24:4	82
Matthew 12:30	211	John 3:16	295
Matthew 12:31-32	137, 139	John 3:18	295
Matthew 13:10-17	95	John 7:53-8:11	77
Matthew 13:31-32	91	John 8	296
Matthew 13:33	96	John 8:3-11	98
Matthew 13:51-52	90	John 8:7	77
Matthew 18:15	98	Acts 11:26	116
Matthew 18:15-17	83, 137	Romans 12:14	21
Matthew 18:15-19	98	Romans 13	81
Matthew 18:16	82	1 Corinthians, book of	106
Matthew 18:21-22	98	1 Corinthians 5:3-5	137
Matthew 18:23-25	98	1 Corinthians 8	102, 105, 106, 108, 109
Matthew 20:1-16	95	1 Corinthians 8-10	104, 106, 109
Matthew 21:12-15	92	1 Corinthians 8:1-13	112, 113
Matthew 21:33-46	90	1 Corinthians 8:5	102
Matthew 21:43	91	1 Corinthians 8:6	295
Matthew 22:2-10	93	1 Corinthians 8:10	105
Matthew 22:1-14	91	1 Corinthians 8:10-11	105
Matthew 22:11-13	94	1 Corinthians 8:16-18, 21	108
Matthew 22:37, 38-40	204	1 Corinthians 9:27	101
Matthew 25:14-30	91, 96	1 Corinthians 10	23, 101-14
Matthew 25:30	97	1 Corinthians 10-11	103, 105
Mark, book of	91, 92, 94, 212	1 Corinthians 10:1	104, 105
Mark 3:28-29	137	1 Corinthians 10:1-22	108
Mark 4:10-12	95	1 Corinthians 10:2	104
Mark 4:30-32	91	1 Corinthians 10:2-4	104
Mark 8:27	225	1 Corinthians 10:3	104
Mark 9	214	1 Corinthians 10:3-4	104
Mark 9:40	211	1 Corinthians 10:4	104
Mark 11:27	91	1 Corinthians 10:6-11	104
Mark 12:1-12	90-1, 92,	1 Corinthians 10:7	104, 110
Mark 12:5	91	1 Corinthians 10:8	104
Mark 12:9	91	1 Corinthians 10:9-13	104
Mark 12:15,16	97	1 Corinthians 10:11	104, 105
Mark 12:29-31	210	1 Corinthians 10:12	109
Mark 12:30,31	204	1 Corinthians 10:13	104, 110
Luke, book of	91, 93, 94, 95, 97, 103, 212	1 Corinthians 10:14	105, 107
Luke 7:31-35	94	1 Corinthians 10:16	105
Luke 8:9-10	95	1 Corinthians 10:17	102, 105
Luke 9	214	1 Corinthians 10:18	105, 110
Luke 9:50	211	1 Corinthians 10:19	105

1 Corinthians 10:20	105, 106	Hebrews 10:28	23, 132, 136, 137
1 Corinthians 10:21	105, 110	Hebrews 10:29	139, 295
1 Corinthians 10:22	106	Hebrews 10:32-34	143
1 Corinthians 10:23	106	Hebrews 10:32-39	133
1 Corinthians 10:24	106, 113	Hebrews 11:13-14	143
1 Corinthians 10:25	110	Hebrews 12:1-17	133
1 Corinthians 10:25-26	106	Hebrews 12:1-29	133
1 Corinthians 10:26	107	Hebrews 12:5	143
1 Corinthians 10:27	106, 110	Hebrews 12:25-29	133
1 Corinthians 10:28	106, 110	Hebrews 13	133
1 Corinthians 10:29	112	Hebrews 13:14	143
1 Corinthians 10:29-33	107	1 Peter	23, 115-29, 297
1 Corinthians 10:31	110	1 Peter 1:1	117, 118, 119
1 Corinthians 11:1-16	102	1 Peter 1:3	120, 121
1 Corinthians 11:17-34	103, 111	1 Peter 1:3-12	120
1 Corinthians 11:18	105	1 Peter 1:4	120
1 Corinthians 13:12	41	1 Peter 1:5	121
1 Corinthians 14:34	249	1 Peter 1:6	116
2 Corinthians 7:10	138	1 Peter 1:7	122
Galatians 3:19	134	1 Peter 1:14	118, 120
Philippians 1:7	117	1 Peter 1:18	118
Philippians 1:13-14	117	1 Peter 1:22	120, 124
Philippians 1:17	117	1 Peter 1:22-23	121
Philippians 1:28-29	117	1 Peter 1:23	120
Philippians 4:14	117	1 Peter 1:24-25	120
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15	137	1 Peter 2:2	121
1 Timothy 2:11, 12	249	1 Peter 2:2-3	120
Hebrews, book of	131-45, 293, 295, 296	1 Peter 2:9	119, 122
Hebrews 2:1	134, 143	1 Peter 2:9-10	122
Hebrews 2:1-4	133, 134	1 Peter 2:10	118, 119, 122
Hebrews 2:2	134	1 Peter 2:11-12	122
Hebrews 2:2-3	132	1 Peter 2:12	127
Hebrews 2:3	143	1 Peter 2:13	124
Hebrews 3:7-4:13	133	1 Peter 2:16	124, 128
Hebrews 3:14	143	1 Peter 2:17	124, 127
Hebrews 4:2	143	1 Peter 2:18-20	123
Hebrews 4:15	143	1 Peter 2:21	125
Hebrews 5:11	143	1 Peter 2:23	124
Hebrews 5:11-6:3	133	1 Peter 3:1	126, 127
Hebrews 5:11-6:12	133	1 Peter 3:1-2	126
Hebrews 6:1	143	1 Peter 3:1-6	123
Hebrews 6:1-3	134	1 Peter 3:3	123
Hebrews 6:1-8	133	1 Peter 3:4	127
Hebrews 6:4	135, 139	1 Peter 3:7	123
Hebrews 6:4-5	135	1 Peter 3:8	124
Hebrews 6:4-8	133, 134, 135, 136	1 Peter 3:9	124
Hebrews 6:4-12	132	1 Peter 3:15	122
Hebrews 6:6	135	1 Peter 4:1	124, 125
Hebrews 6:8	135	1 Peter 4:4	124
Hebrews 6:10	143	1 Peter 4:11	122
Hebrews 9:12	133	1 Peter 4:12	124
Hebrews 10	131, 139, 293, 295	1 Peter 4:13-14	127
Hebrews 10:19-25	133	1 Peter 4:14	124
Hebrews 10:19-39	133	1 Peter 4:16	116
Hebrews 10:23	143	1 Peter 5:1-5	123, 124
Hebrews 10:26-29	135, 136	1 John 5:16	137
Hebrews 10:26-31	132, 133, 135, 137, 144	1 John 5:16-17	137
Hebrews 10:27	138, 139	Revelation 2-3	137

## Qur'anic texts

2:177	204	5:54	187
2:217	68, 187	5:57	171
2:256	193, 208	6:9-64	209
3:28	169	8:72-73	172
3:59-63	209	9:5	175
3:64	207-11, 212, 213, 214	9:23	173
3:86-90	187	9:66	187
3:92	204	9:74	188
3:118-19	170	10:99	193
4:88	170	16:106-107	188
4:89	170	18:29	194
4:90	170	24:2,4,5	196
4:137	187	47:25-28	188
4:137-38	170	50:45	194
4:137-145	171	58:22	173
4:138	192	60:1	174, 175
4:139	170	60:1-4	174
4:141-42	171	60:1-9	205, 210
4:144	171	60:4	173, 175
4:171	213	60:8	175, 176, 180, 210, 211, 214
5:33	196	60:8-9	174, 175
5:38-9	196	60:9	175
5:51	164, 171	60:80	214
5:52-53	171		