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### Liberalism's dangerous religions

*Enlightenment legacies in political theory*

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#### Publication date

2021

#### Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Blijdenstein, A. E. E. (2021). *Liberalism's dangerous religions: Enlightenment legacies in political theory*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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# Liberalism's Dangerous Religions



Enlightenment Legacies  
in Political Theory

Anna Blijdenstein

**Liberalism's Dangerous Religions.  
Enlightenment Legacies in Political Theory**

Anna Blijdenstein

Graphic Design: Mahtab Zamanifar  
Cover Photography: Diana Scherer

Printer: Repros, Amsterdam

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ISBN: 978-90-9035181-0

The research for/publication of this doctoral thesis received financial assistance from the Dutch Research Council (NWO). This publication is part of the project *Critique of Religion: Framing Jews and Muslims in Public Debate and Political Theory* with project number 327-25-009 of the research program *Religion in Modern Society*.

**Liberalism's Dangerous Religions.  
Enlightenment Legacies in Political Theory**

**ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT**

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor  
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam  
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus  
prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,  
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel  
op donderdag 28 oktober 2021, te 16.00 uur

door Anna Elisabeth Emilie Blijdenstein  
geboren te Utrecht

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Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

### **Publications from this thesis**

Earlier versions of two chapters of this thesis have been published before.  
Chapter three was published as:

Blijdenstein, A. 2020. Exposing Political Theory's Theological Roots: Three Caveats. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 54(1-2) , 109-122.

A major part of chapter five was published as:

Blijdenstein, A. 2015. Egalitarian Theories of Religious Freedom and the Black Box of Religion. In Bardon, A., Lee, L., Birnbaum, M. and Stoeckl, K. (Eds.). *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book*. European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, ReligioWest, 76-82.



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# Introduction

For modern society, secularization always is and always must be incomplete. Even as religion seems to vanish from politics and public culture, it never ceases to define the project of modernity, whether negatively, in specters of intolerance and hatred, or positively, in ethics of social justice and equality. Religion is always receding and returning and its repeated tidal flow is essential to the self-image of modernity, which can no more dispense with religion than embrace it.

Jonathan Sheehan - *The Enlightenment Bible*

Throughout the 1980s a range of historical developments led scholars to declare that the world was witnessing a ‘resurgence of religion’ or ‘desecularization’ (see for example Berger 1999; Riesebrodt 2000; Thomas 1995). The end of the cold war, the Iranian revolution, the Rushdie affair, the first headscarf debates in France, and the emergence of the religious right in the United states are among the events that led some to conclude that religion had once again gone public (Casanova 1994). In this same period religion also emerged as one of the central topics in liberal and republican thought. John Rawls designated the fact of pluralism of ‘conceptions of the good’ – both religious and non-religious – as the starting point of his influential account of political liberalism (1985;1993).<sup>1</sup> In the decades that followed many political theorists and philosophers have thought through the relationship between religion and the modern state. They explored, and continue to explore, both questions of establishment – for example, the separation of church and state, the role of religious arguments in political debate, and justification of laws – and of religious freedom – such as accommodation of religious practices, and religious exemptions. The prominence of debates about ‘religion in the public sphere’ within contemporary political philosophy shows how common it has become to assume that people’s divergent religious (or metaphysical) worldviews are essential for understanding issues of pluralism, disagreement, and conflict in today’s societies (Jansen 2017: 371). However, in the same period in which religion made its comeback in the work of normative political philosophers, a diverse group of scholars started questioning the very concepts their discussions rested upon.

The philosophical debates revolving around the topics of religious freedom and non-establishment commonly rest on the assumption that one can distinguish a ‘secular’ and a ‘religious’ – or sacred – realm between which a particular relation *ought* to be established. Yet, complex questions can be raised about the stability, universality, and analytical value of the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’, and their differentiation.<sup>2</sup> The scholars raising such questions often employ a genealogical method to demonstrate that these ostensibly ‘neutral’ concepts underlying political theory and practice are in fact the product of a specific Western historical and political trajectory. Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood are pioneers of a flourishing literature that has brought to light the historical lineages of concepts such as ‘religion’, ‘secularism’, ‘tolerance’, and ‘religious

<sup>1</sup> Religion also plays a central role in Rawls’ earlier work a *Theory of Justice* (1971) in which he designates freedom of conscience as the foundational freedom upon which other basic liberties rest. Equal liberty, Rawls argues, can be arrived at by generalizing ‘the principle of religious toleration to a social form’ (1971: 206).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of such questions see for example Dressler and Mandair 2011; Fitzgerald 2015 and Jansen 2017.

freedom' reminding us 'that even the grandest orienting abstractions of liberal modernity have histories' (Bejan 2017). 'Religion', it is argued, is not a natural, trans-historical phenomenon, but instead a distinctly modern category (Nongbri 2013; Stroumsa 2010). In *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Asad famously traces the 'emergence of religion as a modern historical object' (1993:1) to argue that the mutually dependent concepts of 'religion' and 'secularism' are both imbricated in Protestant Christianity and the advancement of state power. Secularism, he argues, presupposes a particular construction of religion as individual, internal, and belief based. This notion of religion, as an inner mental state abstracted from concrete embodied practices and 'processes of power and knowledge', is not, Asad argues, universal, but grounded in a specific Christian, or more specifically Protestant, theology (ibid: 42-43). The conceptual split between secularism and religion can be further linked to the development of the nation-state. As a strategy for consolidating its power the state created a 'margin to which "religion" and (other forms of uncertain) belief properly belong' (Asad 2004: 285). By 're-locating religion in the moods and motivations of the individual believer' it was thus firmly relegated to the private sphere (Brittain 2005: 149). The secular state, often seen as an outcome of the European Wars of Religion, can therefore not be seen as an impartial arbiter, granting tolerance to the different religions within its territory. Instead it circumscribed the 'social and political space within which the religious may operate' (Bangstad 2009: 191). Religion was granted certain freedoms but only within a circumscribed space, while the state extended its power over that which was deemed 'secular'. This leads to Asad's conclusion that 'toleration was a political means to the formation of strong state power that emerged from the sectarian wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rather than the gift of a benign intention to defend pluralism' (Asad 1993: 206).

These two themes – the Christian substructures underlying ostensibly liberal and secular institutions and frameworks of thought, and the role of the state power in shaping 'the religious' by drawing and redrawing the lines between public and private, politics and religion – reappear in the work of many scholars working in the 'Asadian tradition' (see for example Mahmood 2015: 4). A diverse group of scholars, coming from religious studies, cultural anthropology, intellectual history, literary studies, but also legal theory, has attempted to show that those secular and liberal frameworks of thought dealing with the relationship between religion and the state remain indebted to a European post-Reformation history (see for example Cavanaugh 2009; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Nongbri 2013; Shakman Hurd 2015). Like Asad, they question the prevailing evolutionary narrative of the liberal state as emerging from the wars of religion as a neutral state that separates itself from religion and which can subsequently relate fairly and impartially to different

faiths. Instead, the ‘historically specific genesis of liberalism’ (Laborde 2017: 16) is thought to have created biases towards, or misapprehensions of, religions that do not fit the mold of Protestant Christianity.

The influence of this loose school of thought, which is sometimes broadly referred to as ‘critique of secularism’, is hard to overestimate (Greenberg and Steinmetz-Jenkins 2020: 2). Within many scholarly disciplines, such as anthropology and religious studies, it has become commonplace to problematize the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’, or at least to ‘assert the problematic nature of the pretensions to universality’ these concepts often entail (Bangstad 2009: 189; see also Brittain 2005: 149). More recently liberal political philosophers, working on normative theories of the state-religion relationship, have also been formulating responses to what they call the ‘critical religion school’ (Laborde 2017; Laborde 2020) or sometimes simply ‘the Asadians’ (Cohen 2018; see also Enayat 2017). In answer to critiques pointing out liberal theory’s unsatisfactory and parochial construal of ‘religion’ some have started to rethink their use of this concept in ambitious ways (Laborde 2017). Others question the relevance the genealogical method used by these critics can have for normative political philosophical projects and point out the ‘genetic fallacy’ committed by the genealogists: the mere fact that a concept or institution has a ‘tainted’ history is not by itself proof of the illegitimacy of its current use (Cohen 2018).

The aim of this book is twofold. I aim to contribute to the further historicization of the concept of ‘religion’ and discuss the way in which these genealogies can and should inform contemporary political philosophical work concerning normative questions of religion’s place within the liberal state. In the first part of the book I will develop such a genealogical approach by exploring how the remaking of religion in European Enlightenment thought was connected to characterizations of Judaism and Islam. I will do so by exploring how representations of Judaism, Islam, Jews and Muslims figured in the period’s most intense debates about religious subjects. A discussion of such representations will allow me to redirect attention away from the development of a *Protestant definition* and style of governance of religion, towards the historical construction and use of ‘religious difference’. Early modern discussions of Judaism and Islam show that the development of a modern category of ‘religion’ went hand-in-hand with the development of ideas on what were considered religion’s *dangerous* characteristics; ideas that were put to use flexibly in the construction of religious hierarchies and in the problematization and early forms of securitization<sup>3</sup> of specific groups of believers. The reason for focusing on Enlightenment thought on Judaism and Islam, and not on ecclesiastical authorities or Catholicism – the main objects of criticism for Enlightenment scholars – is that the discussions of Islam

and Judaism help to reveal the interconnections between ‘religion’ and other complex categories. A more expansive tracing of how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam figure in the work of Enlightenment scholars will not only show what dimensions of religion were thought to be problematic or dangerous, but will also shed light on the way the category of ‘religion’ has been entangled with concepts of ethnicity, culture, and race, and how it plays a role in the demarcation of European civilization.

In the second part of the book I discuss the consequences of my genealogical approach for contemporary liberal political theorizing on religion’s place in the liberal democratic state. Those contemporary political philosophers responding to the challenge of critical religion, often do so, I argue, while taking on board a rather narrow account of religion’s historical trajectory. Although this has led to fruitful reflection on the potential (Protestant) biases present in liberal conceptualizations and definitions of religion, I maintain that the broader account of religion’s history within liberal thought, as presented in this book, will allow for a more thorough and critical assessment of liberal political theory on state-religion relationships. Taking seriously the critique of the historically constructed nature of the liberal account of religion, I will argue, also means reflecting on the ideas about problematic and dangerous forms of religiosity, as well as on the ethno-religious hierarchies that were part of this construction. Both public and philosophical debates could benefit from acknowledging these historical legacies, especially in a contemporary context of political discussions about ‘the dangers of religion’ – focusing primarily on the presence of Muslims in Europe and the United States – which are fueled by international conflicts, terrorist attacks, and the politicization of migration and integration.

Before providing a more detailed overview of the structure of the book, and the arguments that will be developed in each chapter, I will briefly discuss the aforementioned problem of the ‘genetic fallacy’. This allows me to discuss the genealogical method and its relationship to normative political philosophy in more detail.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars working on the securitization of religion or religious subjects most commonly describe contemporary processes (see for example Fox and Akbaba 2015; Kaya 2012). In this book I will show that such processes have longer histories. The term ‘securitization’ finds its origin in the work of international relations scholars who define it as a process in which an issue or object comes to be presented as ‘an existential threat to a designated referent object (traditionally, but not necessarily, the state, incorporating government, territory, and society)’ (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde 1998: 21). Once an issue is designated as a security threat this

legitimizes ‘the use of extraordinary measures’, mobilization of special powers and the use of force (ibid). I will employ the term somewhat more broadly. Following Laegaard’s discussion of the securitization of religion I think of securitization as the discursive ‘process of transforming a subject into a matter of “security” by presenting it as involving an extraordinary problem (threat, necessity etc.) requiring certain political actions’ [...] ‘Successfully securitized subjects receive disproportionate amounts of attention and resources’ (Laegaard 2019:104).

### The (Im)possibility of Genealogical Critique

According to Jean Cohen, the scholars she designates as ‘the Asadians’ have made a ‘category mistake’ in formulating their ‘post-secular critique of the modern secular state and of political liberalism’ (Cohen 2018: 208). This diffuse group – in which Cohen naturally places Asad himself (1993; 2003) but also authors ‘such as’ Cavanaugh, Danchin, Hurd and Mahmood (2015, 2016)<sup>4</sup> – has confused ‘genesis with justification’ (Cohen 2018: 218). In their ‘Foucault-inspired post-secular’ genealogies the Asadians criticize ‘secularization, political liberalism and political secularism [...] by unearthing their origins in Christianity, in Protestantism, or in colonial imposition’ (ibid: 219). Their mistake, Cohen argues, is assuming that a ‘historical critique’ absolves them from having to challenge these principles on their own grounds – namely by developing a *normative argument*. ‘The mere fact that certain norms, principles, concepts, and structures emerged in a specific historical context does not invalidate them because justification cannot be reduced to historical genesis’ (ibid). Cohen draws on an often-emphasized limitation of genealogical critique, a limitation eloquently discussed by Peter Gordon:

[A] genealogy of factual inheritance does not vitiate normative possibility for the future. This observation prompts one to doubt whether the historical genealogy of a concept can accomplish what it promises. Although it can shed light on the local deployment of a concept, and how that concept carries past normative meanings beyond its public license, it cannot tell us that the concept is forever shackled to its past, or to the history of its past deployments. This is because the ongoing work of philosophical argumentation develops its own immanent standards of validity that operate as a self-validating horizon for the continued generation of new meanings. The more self-consistent these standards, the less authority the merely historical inheritance can retain (Gordon 2019: 167).

While it seems correct that a historical analysis cannot by *itself* serve ‘as a philosophical critique’ (Laborde 2017: 16), the genetic fallacy objection only makes sense when genealogists do indeed aim to *subvert* concepts and institutions by tracing their histories. Cohen appears to believe that this is the case. The Asadians, she argues, ‘are hostile to liberalism and challenge the very concept of the politically secular state’ (Cohen 2018: 207; see also Joppke 2017; Joppke 2018). This is a very general assertion about a diverse group of scholars, some of which explicitly deny this claim. Saba Mahmood, for example, states:

<sup>4</sup> Cohen further demarcates the group of scholars she addresses by stating ‘the post-secular genealogists include Foucault-inspired

anthropologists, international relations and legal theorists influenced by Talal Asad’ (Cohen 2018: 221).

A scholarly inquiry into [...] its limits, contradictions and violence, should not be mistaken as a denunciation of secularism or as a call for its demise. Secularism is not something that can be done away with any more than modernity can be. It is an ineluctable aspect of our present condition, as both political imagination and epistemological limit. To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of its innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future (2016: 21).

Asad has similarly pointed out that he believes secularism to be in need of 'refashioning, not elimination' and maintains he wants to 'preserve secularism's virtues without clinging to its vices' (Asad 2001: 147).

It might not be surprising that scholars such as Cohen, working on normative theory, are eager to redirect the debate towards 'self-consistent normative standards' and discussions about moral principles, but the broad brushstrokes with which Cohen tries to sweep aside all the genealogists she puts under the Asadian label is unconvincing. Especially as it is precisely the 'self-consistency' and 'immanent validity' of certain normative standards that is questioned by many of the scholars she dismisses.<sup>5</sup> Cohen's argument, however, does direct us towards fundamental questions about the relationship between genealogy and critique. While Cohen seems to assume that genealogy, being by its very nature historical, cannot do any critical work which should thus be left to normative philosophy, others defend the notion of historical critique. Colin Koopman claims that 'genealogy at its best involves a practice of critique in the form of the historical problematization of the present' (Koopman 2013: 3). He believes that genealogy, described as a method of 'philosophico-historical inquiry into the conditions that make possible' certain modern problems, can be critical without falling into the trap of the genetic fallacy (ibid: 6). To argue this Koopman distinguishes between three types of genealogy: subversive, vindicatory, and problematizing. The first two 'attempt to deploy historical inquiry into the (actual or hypothetical) emergence of present practices in order to establish a normative evaluation of these practices' (ibid: 87). The subversive mode does so by calling the concepts, morals, practices, or institutions whose lineages are traced, into question. The vindicatory mode does so by affirming them on the basis of their origin story. Following Koopman, Amy Allen argues that it is due to the passing of judgement *on the ground* of a 'tainted' or 'glorious' history that these two

<sup>5</sup> The conversation between the critical religion school and political theory has also been complicated by its transdisciplinary character. It is necessary to further think through how anthropologists and religious studies scholars can enter into productive conversation with political

theorists and philosophers. Such a complex conversation has a greater chance of success when both sides refrain from starting it based on assumptions about the methodological and normative practices of the other discipline.

types of genealogical critique do not manage to steer clear of conflating validity and genesis (Allen 2013: 238). However, the third, problematizing mode of genealogy, does manage to avoid these dangers because it ‘aims not at a normative evaluation – either negative or positive – of the practices it excavates’ (ibid: 238).

Koopman presents Foucault as a prime example of this third mode of genealogy. Foucault’s project<sup>6</sup> did not aim to ‘normatively evaluate the present practices whose histories he was writing. He rather used genealogy to clarify and intensify the dangers of the present whose histories he studied’ (Koopman 2013: 88). Such a critical project is neither for or against the practices and lineages it explores.

The thought here is that a genuinely problematizing genealogy enables us to appreciate what is gained and what lost in the historical and conceptual transformations we are charting and helps us to see how those transformations have given rise both to specific dangers and to potentials for progressive change that are embedded within our forms of life (Allen 2013: 238-239).

Returning to the genealogical critiques of secularism and religion discussed in this book I would argue that many of the scholars developing such projects do not have ‘subversion’ as their main aim. As we can see for example in the above quote of Saba Mahmood, undermining the secular state is not her goal. Problematizing genealogies of secularism would rather ‘shake secular thought out of its complacency by problematizing its own self-understanding’ (ibid: 240). I agree with Amy Allen that most genealogical projects contain all three problematizing, subversive, and vindicatory elements (ibid: 238). Most importantly, to make *any* convincing claims about the types of genealogy practiced by the scholars working within the ‘Asadian tradition’, the work of individual scholars should be carefully analyzed.<sup>7</sup> Such an analysis will not be attempted here. However, simply dismissing them all based on their committing an alleged ‘genetic fallacy’ is rather rash.

Although the distinction between the three different types of genealogy is an important one, Koopman’s claim that problematizing genealogies are ultimately *non-normative* is contestable. Koopman believes that ‘we can show that practices are problematic, dangerous, fraught, and in need of additional attention without making any normative claims about these practices’ (2013: 92).

<sup>6</sup> Koopman refers to Foucault’s *History of madness* (2013) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977) as examples of such problematizing genealogical works.

<sup>7</sup> In his book *Islam and the Secular in Post-Colonial Thought* (2017) Hadi Enayat takes up this task of a more precise analysis and argues that ‘the dominant mode of genealogy adopted by these scholars is subversive’ (91). Of the authors he discusses – Mahmood, Hurd, Hallaq and Asad – he argues that only the last can be read as a ‘problematizing’ genealogy.

I would argue that calling certain practices, concepts, or intuitions ‘problematic’, ‘dangerous’ or ‘fraught’ is based on implicit or explicit normative claims. ‘What else does dangerous mean if not “likely to lead to something bad or harmful”’ (Allen 2014: 240). This does not mean that such projects *do* end up committing the genetic fallacy – as this is the case only when scholars call into question certain practices or principles purely on grounds of their histories – it means that even when genealogical projects do not contain a full-blown normative theory, the choices and problematizations made are most likely based on some normative standpoint, albeit often implicit. Critical genealogists would do well to make these standpoints explicit and not to be ‘coy’ about their ‘normative commitments’ (Cohen 2018: 207). This is something I will try to abide by throughout this book. After exploring in part one the genealogy of the modern category of religion, its connections to ideas about religion’s dangerous dimensions, and its relation to representations of Europe’s two main religious others, Judaism and Islam, in part two I will address how the normative questions that underlie, *and* are brought forth by, this genealogical project can be taken up by political theorists.

A second defense of genealogy’s critical potential can be found in the work of Amia Srinivasan. She argues that those genealogists who aim to undermine the ‘epistemic standing of our representations’ or the ‘aptness of our concepts’ might indeed not be pursuing a promising strategy since it is vulnerable to the genetic fallacy objection (Srinivasan 2019: 127). However, many critical genealogists are not concerned with the epistemic standing of the concepts they explore. Instead they are interested in what our concepts and representations *do*: ‘what practices they emerge from and help sustain, how they are mobilized by power, what (and whom) they bring into existence, and which possibilities they foreclose’ (ibid: 140). Stepping back in order to scrutinize our representations in this way will allow us to rethink and transform them when they serve an oppressive function.<sup>8</sup>

Looking again at the above quote of Mahmood it becomes clear that she not only denies her aim is to subvert the concept whose historical lineage she examines – in this case that of ‘secularism’ – she adds instead that her intention is to shed light on its ‘regulatory and productive dimensions’ (Mahmood 2016: 21).

<sup>8</sup> Srinivasan adds that the idea that we should focus our attention on what a representation does, and not on its ‘epistemic merits’ still has an ‘uneasy place in analytic philosophy’ (2019: 142) as philosophers might argue that there is no *necessary* relation ‘between a representation and its oppressive effects’. Srinivasan argues that genealogists do not indeed establish such a necessary conceptual connection,

however they can show that the relationship between a representation and its effect is not merely contingent: ‘The historian observes that a certain representation co-originated with or has consistently gone hand in hand with – and thus plausibly has the function of producing – certain patterns of domination’ (ibid).

Many of the genealogists interested in the development of the modern category of religion have similar aims. They trace its history not to be able to then cast the concept aside as *invalid* but rather to gain insight into a concept's *workings*. The purpose of Asad's historical tracing of religion and secularism is not merely to lay bare the conceptual pair's contingent origins; his main interest lies with secularity as a 'mode of producing and governing (secular) subjects' (Amir-Moazami 2011: 17). Insight into the co-development of the modern category of religion and 'its Siamese twin "secularism"' is used by Asad to gain an understanding of secularity as a mode of governance which restructures knowledge, power, 'subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs, and expectations in modernity' (Asad 2001: 221).

This idea of critical genealogy making more visible the productive dimensions of concepts and representations can also be used to question a distinction made by John R. Bowen in his claim that scholars analyzing secularism are *either* discussing 'a set of historical processes that characterize the modern age' or 'a dilemma of governance that emerges at quite distinct times and places' (2010: 680-681). These two objects of study, he claims, lead to different research questions and require different methodologies:

[H]istorical genealogies for the one; political and legal analyses for the other. One kind of study cannot reveal the other object: the genealogy of an idea will not show how a regime works, nor will studying legal practice in India resolve debates over early modern Europe (Bowen 2010: 681).

Bowen urges scholars to follow the strategy that 'bears the most fruit' and focus on concrete and particular dilemmas of governance (ibid: 682). It does not help the analyses of actual state-religion relationships, he argues, when we see these concrete cases as 'instantiations of an historical force or condition' (ibid: 681). Following Srinivasan, it becomes apparent that Bowen creates a false opposition here. A critical genealogy can try to gain insight into the productive dimensions of our representations by studying the context of their emergence and development. This allows us to take a step back from our representations and be more critical of how they are put to use within concrete political contexts, and what work they do within the dilemmas of governance arising from these contexts. This can be done without considering each concrete case as an inevitable outcome of an historical force.

Throughout this book I will further explore the relationship between critical genealogy and contemporary political theory. Before I lay out in more detail how a dialogue between the two will look, I will briefly discuss a specific characteristic of many current reflections on the genealogy of religion and secularism, namely their focus on these concepts' 'Protestant foundations'. I will go on to explain

why the genealogy developed in this book will aim to go beyond exhuming the ‘theological roots’ of liberal political theory.

### Exhuming Christian Sub-structures

Those political theorists and philosophers who have begun reflecting on their use of the concept of ‘religion’ do so in response to critiques which point out liberal theory’s unsatisfactory and biased construal of this concept. Within liberal political philosophy the secular state is traditionally conceptualized as an institution that does not privilege any particular religion, but by not granting authority to truth-claims based on religious belief allows freedom to different faiths. Theorists such as Asad, Mahmood, and others belonging to what I will continue to call the ‘critical religion school’, have questioned this alleged neutrality by pointing out that the conceptual split between religion and the secular is the product of a specific European history.

Many genealogists, and also the political theorists responding to them (see for example Bader 2007; Cohen 2018; Conolly 2006; De Roover and Balangadhara 2008; Laborde 2017 and Spinner-Halev 2005), focus on a very *specific* aspect of the Western European historical trajectory in which modern notions of religion and secularism took shape: they trace these concepts to their emergence within Early Modern thought so as to bring out the Christian – or Protestant – substructures underlying them. A reason for exposing the hidden religious roots of liberal thought and practice is the exclusionary effects these inheritances can have.<sup>9</sup> The historical trajectory that brought forth the modern concept of religion and the modern notion of secularism, it is argued, led to the proliferation of discourses and legal regimes biased against religious traditions that do not ‘look like’ Protestantism (Nongbri 2013: 5; Spinner-Halev 2005: 33). The modern *category* of religion used by states and international courts has a Protestant genealogy and therefore does ‘not comport with other traditions’, thereby privileging (Protestant) Christianity (Mahmood 2015: 175). The modern right to religious freedom, for example, ‘privileges belief and conscience at the expense of practices, rites and rituals’ (Mahmood 2015: 175; see also Danchin 2011; Mahmood 2006). This can cause non-Christian believers to be disadvantaged, misrecognized, or even excluded from the liberal public sphere. Both Asad and Mahmood supplement their critical genealogies with anthropological work aiming to show that Muslim religious subjectivity, in particular, cannot be understood through the modern category of ‘religion’ which emphasizes privatized, individual belief. Mahmood’s notion of ‘Muslim piety’, and Asad’s conception of ‘Islamic

<sup>9</sup> Those scholars who argue that secularism and Christianity are inextricably linked do not always draw the conclusion that secularism is therefore a

parochial concept which cannot but exclude non-Christian traditions (see for example Taylor 2007; Gauchet 1997).

discursive traditionality' highlight the importance of embodied practices, ritual, and (moral) community as constitutive of Muslim religiosity (Asad 1986, 1993; Mahmood 2006; see also Amir-Moazami 2011; Fernando 2010; Jouilli and Amir-Moazami 2006). The focus on the persistence of Christian categories and structures within secular and liberal thought, resulting in the inability to accommodate or fairly treat Muslims and other non-Christian religious groups, brings with it the risk of essentializing 'religious' and 'secular' identities. The work of Talal Asad has been the target of different critiques pointing out that his work makes insufficient room for context, 'leading to a picture of the secular as a unitary system' as well as to an essentialist idea of Muslim religiosity which hides any inner tensions and contestations (Bangstad 2009; see also Jansen 2011; Leezenberg 2010). His overly monolithic conceptualization of secularism, and the way it is presented as opposed to 'non-Western' religious traditions, have led some to conclude that Asad's 'position contains elements that suggest a dualistic "clash of civilizations" approach' (Brittain 2005: 154); for Asad centralizes the 'confrontation of a generic "Islamic tradition" or "traditional Islam" with an equally generic Western "imperialism", "colonialism" or "modernity"' (Leezenberg 2019: 98). The idea that 'Islamic traditions necessarily stand in an alternative counter-relation to liberal politics' re-inscribes the very binaries critical religion scholars aim to overcome (Enayat 2017: 92). A related criticism is that Asad ultimately remains strongly focused on the opposition between religion and secularism, and thus within what has been called the framework of 'religio-secularism' (Dressler 2014; see also Jansen 2017). Moreover, it is a focus 'with a strong penchant toward critiquing secularism rather than religion' (Jansen 2017: 370).

When it comes to the way these genealogical critiques have been taken up within contemporary political theory scholarship on religion, I want to suggest that the focus on the 'religious foundations' of liberal principles, and on the Protestant nature of the *category* of religion, becomes even more narrow. Cécile Laborde, for example, interprets Asad as a promising reinterpretation of the Schmittian idea that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt 1985/1932: 36). What has been pointed out by Asad and others, she states, is that the universally valid secular state is in fact 'deeply implicated in a particular (Christian) political theology' (Laborde 2014: 693). It is this critique which urges us 'to think harder about the category of religion that is at work in secular liberal theory' (ibid: 695). Asad himself opposes the idea that 'secularism does not recognize its functional status as a religion' (Yelle 2011: 24). He explicitly states that the secular 'is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence

that excludes the sacred)' (Asad 2003: 25). The secular framework does not simply mask religion: 'If one stripped appearances one would see that some apparently secular institutions were really religious' (ibid). Instead he assumes 'that there is nothing *essentially* religious' (ibid). Furthermore, this 'framework', according to Asad, consists of more than a biased 'category of religion'; it 'brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities' (ibid).

In later chapters I will develop this discussion by further probing into the consequences of the specific exposure of the theological roots, or Christian substructures, of liberal political theory, and of the preoccupation with the category or definition of religion this theory relies upon. The genealogy put forward in this book will aim to go beyond exploring the Protestant roots of the modern category of religion; for the historical trajectory that is under scrutiny did not *only* produce a particular, Protestant, definition of 'religion' and the 'religious'. The 'remaking' – or, as some say, 'invention' of religion – went hand-in-hand with the creation of religious hierarchies,<sup>10</sup> and I shall look at these within European political thinking about Judaism and Islam in the early stages of the colonial enterprise. Early modernity gave shape to ideas on problematic and dangerous forms of religiosity that were projected onto specific religions and groups of 'believers'. By examining Enlightenment thought on Judaism and Islam, I aim to draw attention to those aspects of 'religion' which were thought to pose a problem or present a danger. This focus on early modern representations of Judaism and Islam will also illustrate that, historically, religion has long been entangled with other categories such as ethnicity, nationality, race, and civilization. This is something which becomes insufficiently visible when one focusses on the historical lineages and Christian roots of the modern *definition* of religion. Looking at early modern debates it will become apparent that while theological categories and binaries play a part they do not do so in a *continuous* way. Theological categories become productive in specific contexts and are 'put to use' serving different political interests. As I will try to show, a focus on 'Protestant bias' cannot help in understanding the salience of certain forms of religious difference within concrete historical and political contexts. When the genealogy of religion is perceived as a process in which 'Protestant theology' is translated into 'secular' terms, this hides from view the fact that the fixation on, or even

<sup>10</sup> This has also been emphasized for example by genealogists who discuss the Protestant dimensions of European imperialism and show how a modern conception of religion was used to distinguish higher and lower religions (Asad 1993: 42; Masuzawa 2005; Nongbri 2015). Saba Mahmood follows Webb Keane who argues that the globalization of a modern concept of

religion was part of the spread of what he calls a Protestant 'semiotic ideology' (Keane 2007: 3). This semiotic ideology, based on a set of binaries – 'between object and subject, between substance and meaning, signifiers and signified, form and essence' (Mahmood 2009: 843) – became crucial in distinguishing those religions that could and could not be seen as 'modern'.

the production of, certain religious differences may serve the particular ends of religious or political groups. Adopting this broader genealogical perspective could lead further to a fruitful shift of focus within contemporary political philosophy; a shift from questions about what religion *is* to questions about what religion *does*: ‘What role does religion play in thinking about and governance of the problems of coexistence/ difference?’ (Bejan 2017).

### Overview of Chapters

In the first part of this book I will develop a genealogical approach to ‘religion’ by discussing characterizations of Judaism and Islam in the thought of Enlightenment scholars. I will show that these two faiths played a pivotal role in the period’s philosophical discussions on religious subjects, and that tracing such characterizations is thus crucial for understanding ‘the remaking of religion in European Enlightenment thought’. In **chapter one** I will begin by addressing four *dimensions* of religion that were often problematized by early modern scholars, and will show how these religious characteristics were projected onto Judaism and Islam. I will focus on the topics of *fanaticism*, *legalism* (or political religion), *particularism*, and *materialism* (e.g. ceremonialism, embodied practices). All of which, I will later argue, still play a role in contemporary debates about the place of religion within the liberal state. I will establish the meaning and use of these concepts by tracing them in the thought of a carefully selected group of Enlightenment scholars.

These ‘dangerous’ characteristics of certain forms of religiosity, I will show, were seen as intimately intertwined. Connections were made, for example, between legalism and fanaticism, and between obstinate, ‘unenlightened’ particularism and religious signs and ceremonies. Enlightenment discourses on Judaism and Islam thus illustrate that the development of a modern idealized notion of ‘religion’ was accompanied by a range of ideas on religion’s problematic characteristics. In the way these characteristics are projected onto Judaism and Islam, it becomes clear that certain theological tropes and prejudices were able to subsist, more or less intact, in the thought of early modern scholars. In the projection of religion’s problems onto Judaism and Islam one can further see an attempt to imagine a Europe free from such problems. The way in which Judaism and Islam, Jews and Muslims, figure in the work of eighteenth-century scholars sheds light on the early stages of endeavoring to demarcate a European civilization no longer connected to the Near East, even though the entangled roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be found there.

In **chapter two** I will focus on the work of one Enlightenment scholar, namely Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant’s influence on the development of a

modern notion of religion is widely assigned a central role in the construction of the idea of religion as an interior belief or mental state (Asad 1993). I will show that Kant did not solely contribute to the development of a modern interiorized notion of religion privileging Protestant Christianity; as with many Enlightenment scholars, Kant discusses fanaticism, legalism, materialism, and particularism in relation to both Islam and Judaism. I will explore how these topics are taken up in Kant's work and how they are integrated into his broader philosophical framework.

I will argue that those who focus on the 'Protestant bias' present in a Kantian *definition* of religion often overlook the interdependencies of the categories of religion, race, and ethnicity present in his work. This intertwinement becomes most apparent when Kant's work on universal religion is read alongside his infamous taxonomies of non-European peoples and races. It is the opposition between Orient and Occident which most clearly shows the entanglement between categories of religion, ethnicity, and race in the thought of one of liberalism's most influential thinkers. Kant's discussions of Judaism and Islam, I maintain, serve a function in his philosophical project which establishes the relationship between religion, reason, morality, and autonomy. In Kant's work one can distinguish two common anxieties linked to religion, namely, that it may encourage both total subjugation and revolutionary liberty, both of which can be interpreted as inhibiting reason. By tracing the characterizations of Judaism and Islam in his work I further aim to shed light on Kant's attempts to 'police and patrol the boundaries of Europe as a place of Reason, Reflection and Freedom' (Almond 2010: 119).

In the transitional **chapter three** I will further reflect on the relation between the critical genealogy of religion presented in the first two chapters and contemporary liberal political philosophy on state-religion relationships discussed in the second part of the book. In this chapter I will delve deeper into the topics introduced in the previous paragraph and will problematize the focus on theological *continuity* present in some genealogical projects, and especially in the way 'religion's history' is taken up in discussions between liberal political philosophers and the critical religion school (Bader 2007; Cohen 2018; Conolly 2006; De Roover and Balagangadhara 2008; Laborde 2017; Mahmood 2009; Spinner-Halev 2005). While the discussion of early modern thought in the first two chapters aims to bring a range of theological inheritances to light, these are not limited to a 'Protestant' definition of religion but also include a range of binaries (law-spirit, mind-body, thought-action, divine and civil obligation) as well as accounts of fanaticism and enthusiasm. A focus on theological continuity, or Protestant bias within liberal political theory, I want to argue, can easily overlook the flexible ways in which these concepts are used.

I will point out three risks of critiques that solely focus on the persistence of theological categories, and will do so by looking closely at John Locke's work on tolerance. Critiques of the liberal framework that focus on uncovering its Christian or Protestant roots run the risk of perpetuating essentialist ideas about the nature of different religions, and of overlooking the importance of historical and contemporary political contexts in shaping discussions on religion. A monolithic presentation of 'the' genealogy of religion which claims that contemporary liberal ideas on, for example, religion, secularity, and tolerance are in fact 'Christian' or 'Protestant', hides from view the importance of the different political and historical contexts in which these categories have played, and continue to play, a role. Furthermore, scholars who focus on the Protestant understanding of religion may fail to question the religio-secular perspective on social plurality and conflict, and often ignore religion's interaction with other categories such as culture, civilization, nationality, and ethnicity (Jansen 2011).

In the second part of the book I will start by tracing the Enlightenment legacies present in the work of some of the most influential contemporary normative theorists working on the relationship between religion and the state. In **chapter four** I discuss Jürgen Habermas' work on religion in the public sphere. I will focus on one of the normative implications of his postsecularism, namely the argument that a postsecular society does not 'preclude the permissibility of religious utterances in the political public sphere' (Habermas 2008a: 28). In the first part of the chapter I will show how Habermas connects religion to authoritarianism, and – ultimately – to political violence. In the second part of the chapter, I will look at how Habermas' recognition of religion's specificity reveals a contested connection between rites and particularism. Lastly, I will discuss how Habermas' treatment of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam connects to his deeply ambivalent idea of religion as both an origin of conflict and moral motivation.

In the **fifth chapter** I discuss liberal egalitarian approaches to religion and the state. Unlike Habermas, liberal egalitarians believe that religious convictions should not be seen as uniquely special. When discussing questions of the free exercise and establishment of beliefs, liberal egalitarians do not solely focus on religion and religious beliefs. The category of what is protected by religious freedom is extended by *analogizing* or comparing religion with other beliefs, commitments, and identities. I will discuss two egalitarian theories of religious freedom: firstly, John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (2005), a book that since its first publication in 1993 has provided a dominant framework and vocabulary for discussing the relationship between religion and politics which has influenced both political theory and legal thought on religious freedom, the nature of the

secular state, and the possibility of ‘accommodating’ religious and moral diversity within modern liberal democracies. Secondly, I will look at Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure’s book *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (2011).

Because liberal egalitarian theories do not depend on a particular definition of religion, they seem less vulnerable to the critiques which point out liberal theory’s dependency on a biased Protestant idea of what religion entails. However, by looking more closely at the work of the above authors I will show that they view religion as a matter of individual, conscientious conviction which helps us towards an understanding of our values and commitments, and which guides our moral judgments. I will argue that Rawls and Taylor and Maclure thus overlook the communal, habitual, embodied aspects of religion and neglect to consider that certain aspects of religious experience cannot be reinterpreted as stemming from individual conscience. These assumptions about religion are not only found in the theories’ general definitions and descriptions of religion, but also in discussions of religion’s dangers and in descriptions of specific religions and religious believers. I will further maintain that the emphasis on religions being coherent and complete systems of values containing an impenetrable transcendent core leads the authors to minimize the room for conflict within religion and emphasizes the idea of the irreconcilability of ‘competing’ religions.

In the final **chapter six** I conclude by discussing in more detail what a broader and more contextually sensitive account of religion’s historical trajectory can offer to normative political theorists working on religion’s place within the state. I argue that political theorists reflecting on the ‘historical embeddedness’ of liberal thought on religion should look beyond ‘Protestant legacies’ and the development of the modern category of religion. They should also take into account liberal thought’s historical entanglement in ethno-religious hierarchies and histories of the political uses of fanaticism and ‘dangerous religiosity’.<sup>10F</sup> I will argue this point examining Cécile Laborde’s recent disaggregative approach to religion and the liberal state. I will focus on the way her account is formulated in response to what she describes as ‘the critical religion challenge’, critiques developed by a broad range of scholars pointing out the ‘indeterminacy and inadequacy of the liberal construal of religion itself’ (Laborde 2017: 14). In *Liberalism’s Religion* (2017) Laborde carefully rethinks religion’s place within liberal theory and constructs a theoretical account that does not rely on historically construed assumptions of dangerous religiosity or depend on a particular definition of religion. Nevertheless, I want to argue that her book still presents too narrow an account of the critical religion challenge, and for this reason leaves open certain questions of how to analyze and critique political practices, discourses, and institutions that *are* steeped in ethno-religious hierarchy, and which rely on contested notions of dangerous religiosity, or prejudicial views of particular religions.

Liberal political philosophers, I will argue, should not only reflect on their conception of religion but also on the kind of state-religion relationships they choose to engage with. A more politically and historically sensitive approach to religion and state might entail a move away from political theory's favorite hard cases which can be neatly divided into questions of either freedom of religion or of establishment; for religious differences can become *politicized* in ways that are not captured by this division. I argue that what is needed is a stronger engagement with the historically produced securitization, surveillance, and racialization of religion, and a recognition that potentially prejudicial notions of dangerous religiosity can play a role in determining threats to public order and security and operate in state discourses on orthodoxy, extremism, fundamentalism, and radicalization. I will further argue for a stronger focus on concrete political contexts in which specific religious differences become salient. Political theorists, I thus maintain, should not only question how religion is *defined*, but also what it *does* in the governance of societal conflicts and how it is connected to other categories such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and civilization.

# Chapter 1

## **Judaism and Islam. Remaking Religion in Enlightenment Thought**

More than any other period in history, the Enlightenment has been perceived as the 'very cradle of the secular world' (Sheehan 2003: 1064). Although rigorous criticism has been levelled at the idea that the Enlightenment can be understood as a 'philosophical program whose anti-religious zeal paved the way for our secular present', the thought that 'religion' was one of the Enlightenment's most intensely debated topics remains salient (De Dijn 2012: 801).

Opposing the idea that the Enlightenment can be characterized as a *unified* movement which brought forth the principles and institutions of liberal democracy, many historians have adopted a disaggregative approach to studying and describing the age of Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> In several cases, scholars have tried to maintain the coherence of the category by defining its opposites. It may not be possible to delimit the Enlightenment as a coherent set of ideas about nature, man, and society, but it is clear what the diverse members of the movement had in common: their disapproval of certain forms or aspects of religion. ‘The *philosophes* themselves’ says Annelien de Dijn ‘often talked about revealed religion and “superstition” as the main target of their movement’ (2012: 787). In *Barbarism and Religion* (2004) Pocock claims that diverse ‘enlightenments’ can be defined as such by their participation – knowingly or unknowingly – in the diminishment of ‘spiritual authority’ (Pocock 2004: 306). Others put forward ‘fanaticism’ or ‘enthusiasm’ as the objects of Enlightenment critique; two categories that are often, although not exclusively, applied to certain features of religion (Heyd 1995; Toscano 2006, 2010).

Jonathan Sheehan claims that to fully understand the complex relationship between Enlightenment and religion, juxtaposing the two categories does not suffice. The old consensus which saw the Enlightenment as ‘forcing religion into the corners of human experience and destroying the stories it told about nature, society and mankind’ has proven hard to maintain (Sheehan 2003: 1068). It is clear, however, that the Enlightenment has had a vast influence on the way in which we currently conceive of religion and of the roles it can and cannot legitimately play in society. A productive scholarship should, therefore, focus on how in the Enlightenment religion was ‘remade’ and given ‘new forms and meanings’.

It would be an account of how new “religions” were produced in and through the media of the Enlightenment. It would be an account of how religion was made modern, how it was reconstructed in such ways as to incorporate it into the fabric of modernity (ibid: 1077).

As an example of such radical change in the conceptual content of ‘religion’, Sheehan discusses the seventeenth-century construction of ‘religions’ as ‘sets of propositional beliefs which allowed for the comparison of various religions by juxtaposing the content of their beliefs’ (ibid: 1074). This modern usage of the category can be compared to the prior use of ‘religion’ to describe monastery life or the ‘the careful performance of rites’ (Harrison 2002: 11; see also Sheehan 2003:

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Different national enlightenments, religious and irreligious, moderate and radical (Jacob

1981; Israel 2001, 2009; Porter and Teich 1981; Sorkin 2008).

1074; Smith 1998: 269-270). It can also be contrasted to the medieval emphasis on faith and piety, highlighting sincere commitment and inner dynamic.

The idea that this period advanced a novel concept of religion is also embraced by Peter Harrison who, in *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, argues that ‘the notion that there are “religions”, distinguished by discrete sets of beliefs and practices and linked by a common and generic “religion”, is actually a product of the European Enlightenment’ (Harrison 2002: 81). This, he claims, led to an increased emphasis on differences between the religious practices of groups of believers:

In early modern religious controversy [...] attention was increasingly focused upon those external, objective aspects of the lives of the faithful as it became an urgent matter to identify those crucial differences upon which eternal salvation was thought to depend (ibid: 92).

The importance of *comparison* for the birth of a modern concept of religion is also discussed by Guy Stroumsa, who focusses on the new epistemological foundations that were invented in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the understanding of religious phenomena. The birth of the modern comparative history of religion, he argues, ‘can be called the discovery of religion’ (Stroumsa 2010: 5). The need to come to grips with both newly discovered peoples and their ‘religious’ practices in the Americas and South and East Asia, and with the religious divisions and conflicts in the wake of the Reformation, contributed to what Stroumsa calls the ‘semantic externalization of religion and its transformation from inner piety to social patterns of behavior’ (ibid: 27). The word ‘religious’ would no longer refer to an inner vision but to systems of belief and behavior which could be studied and compared. The category was thereby also extended to practices and forms of worship and belief that had formerly been identified as ‘idolatry’ or ‘heresy’ (ibid: 25; see also Boyarin 2004: 12).

This does not mean that these old categories disappeared, however. Jonathan Sheehan shows how ‘idolatry’ was assimilated ‘into the heart of religion’ during the seventeenth century (2006: 38). Before this period idolatry was defined as simply opposed to religion, here conceived as true religion or Christian religion. Deviations from this true religion – idolatry, but also paganism, impiety, and superstition – were placed in the domain of the *profane* ‘a theological concept that described what was set against or in opposition to (*pro*) the temple (*fanum*)’ (ibid: 36). Sheehan shows how Calvinist scholars – English Calvinists in particular – in their discussions on the nature of genuine worship, and in their attempts to understand deviations from God’s laws, developed the idea that idolatry was intimately entwined with religion. Even those people who believed in the one

true God were always at risk of dethroning him in their imaginations and of setting up some other object in his place (ibid: 48). The notion of idolatry was thereby moved into the same conceptual space as religion. This shift goes hand-in-hand with a novel distinction between sacred and profane, a distinction that is anthropological rather than theological. All forms of worship, genuine or idolatrous, become part of the domain of the sacred. The domain of the profane, says Sheehan, ceased to be filled with those practices and beliefs that are opposed to true, Christian religion, but instead came to describe a neutral sphere, separate from the religious domain, which could be characterized as ‘the “vulgar”, the “secular”, or more generally, the “common cares and affairs of life”’ (ibid: 58).

Other authors emphasize the normative dimensions of the new, modern concept of religion. Not only did its descriptive uses change, the period also brought forward specific ideas on what being religious *should* entail. Scholars such as Brent Nongbri and most famously, Talal Asad, stress the codependency of the modern concept of religion and the notion of secularism (Nongbri 2013: 5; Asad 1993; 2003). The simultaneous birth of these two concepts, which is linked both to the Reformation and the advance of the modern state, led to the development of a specific discourse in which religion was *ideally* a set of beliefs that was ‘privately held, spiritual and nonpolitical’ (Nongbri 2013: 6). Sheehan argues that this criterion of interiority and spirituality should be seen as ensuing from the advancement of an anthropological category of religion:

The criterion of interiority was summoned forth by anthropological analysis. Once the formal and ritual dimensions of Christianity were assimilated to those of the pagans, the interior life of faith served to distinguish Christianity from its spiritual competitors (Sheehan 2006: 63).

He thus presents the interior definition of genuine religion as a ‘compensatory reaction’ to the claim that religion was common to all, ‘from the basest idolaters to the loftiest sages’(ibid).

In this chapter I will focus on how these general changes in the meaning and use of the concept of ‘religion’ were related to, and had its effect on, ideas about *specific* religions. I will discuss the ways in which the ‘remaking of religion’ in European Enlightenment thought was connected to representations of Judaism and Islam. As I will show, these two faiths played a pivotal role in the period’s discussions of religious subjects, which were inspired both by a post-Reformation fragmentation of Christianity and by increasing knowledge of the existence of various non-Christian traditions. A growing awareness of the permanence of confessional disputes and the plurality of religious traditions generated different question and

debates: inquiries into the existence of natural or ‘innate’ religion and its relation to revealed religion; discussions on the limits of tolerance; and investigations into the historical conditions for the development of different faiths. It also led to what Peter Harrison appropriately describes as ‘the projection of Christian disunity unto the world’ (Harrison 2002: 174). A fourfold scheme dividing the religious world into Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and a residual category of ‘idolatry’ or ‘paganism’, became the dominant way of classifying different traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Smith 1998: 275).

In many Enlightenment discussions Judaism and Islam thus still occupy a *distinct* position as Christian Europe’s two monotheistic others. This ‘theological triangle’ between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam was recognized since the birth of Islam in the eighth century. Enlightenment scholars could draw on several centuries of polemical exchanges between these three traditions born in the Near East, all of which ‘conceived of themselves as being the true children of Abraham’ (Stroumsa 2015: 63). Attempts to understand the rituals and beliefs of newly discovered peoples in colonized territories also sparked a renewed interest in the customs of these two familiar strangers. The development of a proto-anthropological study and comparison of religious custom is aptly illustrated by Bernard and Picart’s *Religious Ceremonies of the World* (1723-1737). In seven highly popular eighteenth-century volumes, the religious customs of both Jews and Muslims are discussed and illustrated with detailed engravings, next to those of different Christian sects and of the rituals of different Indian, American and African peoples.<sup>12</sup>

Enlightenment discussions of Judaism and Islam, however, do not always arise from a genuine interest in the plurality of religious traditions and their histories. Enlightenment thought can be characterized as a ‘battle over a Christian edifice’ and the figures of Judaism and Islam – and ‘the Jew’ and ‘the Muslim’ – are frequently deployed instrumentally in its polemics (Nirenberg 2013: 342; Harrison 2002: 144-145). Parties in confessional disputes and those thinkers criticizing revealed religion, or religious authority in general, often employed negative representations of Judaism and Islam, using them as comparisons with which to prove their adversaries’ ideas as erroneous. Peter Harrison uses the term ‘Paganopapism’ to describe the exploitation of ‘other religions’ in anti-Catholic polemics. Luther was the first who compared ‘Papism’, ‘Mahometanism’ and Judaism to show that ‘they were in essence the same’ (Harrison 2002: 144). But Protestant thinkers were not the only ones comparing their opponents to Muslims or Jews.

<sup>12</sup> The manner in which Jewish customs such as circumcision are represented in books and detailed engravings is considered to be remarkably respectful

for the period, as is its evaluation of Islam. Bernard and Picart’s depiction of Catholic practices is the most critical (Hunt, Jacob and Meinhardt, 2010).

As we will see in this chapter, Judaism and Islam did not only appear in scholarly debates explicitly addressing ‘religious’ topics such as the toleration of different religious practices; they also appeared in discussions on matters ranging from the merits of primitive and civilized life, or agriculture and trade, to those on the history of civilizations, and the perfectibility of human nature (Hertzberg 1968: 7). The deployment of these concepts of Judaism and Islam in mainstream Enlightenment polemics explains how specific constructions of these faiths became central to the self-perception of European thinkers; it explains the prevalence of stereotypes of ‘the Jew’ and ‘the Mahometan’ in the thought of people who in their daily lives and societies had very little – if any – real interaction with actual Jews and Muslims.

In the first part of the chapter I will further introduce the different roles Judaism and Islam played in the thought of early modern scholars. I will not only argue for the prominence of Judaism, Islam, Jews and Muslims within many Enlightenment debates, but will also discuss how the perceptions of these two faiths relate to broader topics in the work of Enlightenment thinkers. In the second part of the chapter I will focus on four different aspects of religion which were commonly problematized by these scholars and show how these were related to, and projected onto, Judaism and Islam. In these discussions we discover new ideas about what religion is, what it should be, and how it relates and should relate to other spheres of life. I will discuss how these new ideas developed in opposition to, and through interaction with, specific ideas on Europe’s religious ‘others’.

### **Judaism, Islam and Europe in Enlightenment Polemics**

‘Though living Jews were scarce in eighteenth-century France, literary ones were easy to find’ states David Nirenberg in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (2013: 343). Before the French Revolution, there were approximately forty thousand Jews residing in France, more than three-quarters of whom lived in Alsace, in the surroundings of the city of Metz (Hertzberg 1968: 121). Nevertheless, Voltaire’s writings alone contain 4,394 references to the Jews. Searches in the ARTFL database of French literature show 6,624 results for the words *Jew*, *Hebrew* and *Israelite* in eighteenth-century volumes. Thereby occurring more often than the word English, despite France’s long struggle for European hegemony with its overseas neighbor (Nirenberg 2013: 344). In the famous *Encyclopédie*, which contains the work of more than 140 different contributors, *juif*, *juifs*, *juive*, and *juives* appear 2,360 times, an average of one mention every seven-and-a-half pages of this 18,000-page volume (Hertzberg 1968: 56). Pierre Bayle’s famous journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* on average devoted one article to a Jewish theme in each monthly issue (Sutcliffe 2003: 32-33).

To explain the high incidence of Judaic themes in the work of the *philosophes*, Nirenberg discusses the types of work the Jews did for them. Firstly, the figure of the Jew played an important role in debates over the rapidly changing economy and the expansion of the money-market; for the *philosophes*, as for many before them, ‘the sphere of economic circulation was thoroughly “Jewish”’ (Nirenberg 2013: 345). The Jews also appeared in Enlightenment discussions because they represented the origins of revelation; for those trying to uphold the authority of Christian scripture, the ancient Jews were sometimes described as a ‘examples of a primitive age when revealed religion was not yet so alienated from human reason’ (ibid: 347). Old Testament themes, however, are also prevalent in the work of those who were determined to criticize ecclesiastical authority – or revealed religion in general – by aiming at its foundations. Jewish scripture, in the form of the Old Testament, was considered by many as a foundational document on which claims of Christianity at least partly depended (Sutcliffe 2003: 5). Lastly, Jews figured prominently in discussions on toleration, both as frequent victims of persecution and oppression, which made them ‘symbols of the intolerance that religious fanaticism and superstition produce’ (ibid), and as a minority that itself was often regarded as fanatic and intolerant, thus creating a dilemma for those wishing to include Judaism in their aim of universalizing such principles as freedom of religion. The irrational and fanatical Jews, claims Nirenberg, were a ‘limit case’ used to explore the boundaries of Enlightenment universality (2013: 349).

In *Judaism and Enlightenment* (2003) Adam Sutcliffe adds several topics to the list of Enlightenment polemics in which the subject of the Jews – ancient or contemporary – had a prominent place. The ancient Hebrews, he argues, were not only of interest as receivers of revelation, but were often invoked politically. The political and social structures of the Hebrews were discussed both as an example of a perfect polity and as a model of theocracy and oppression (Sutcliffe 2003: 16). Sutcliffe also discusses the importance of the Old Testament and the ancient Jews in the emerging field of historiography. In the early seventeenth century it was thought to be self-evident that the Bible provided the key to understanding history (Harrison 2002: 99). The growth of knowledge about non-European civilizations, however, made the centrality of the Biblical narrative of history increasingly hard to sustain (Sutcliffe 2003:16). Those aspiring to develop more rational and universal accounts of global history often challenged the ‘historical status of the Old Testament and the privileged narrative of Jewish history contained within it’ (ibid: 59). Others, propagating new nationalist identities and developing histories supporting these identities, were also highly critical of the Judaic historical account, as the transnational, wandering Jew blurred those borders

and distinctions they wished to construct (ibid: 6).<sup>13</sup> The prominent role of Judaic themes in a range of early modern debates leads Ronald Schechter to conclude that ‘the Jews were “good to think” [...] they facilitated the conceptualization and articulation of a number of ideas that were of special importance to their contemporaries’ (2003: 8).

Although the engagement of Enlightenment scholars with Islam and Muslims revolves around several of the same topics – for example tolerance, Islam’s relation to Christianity, and its place in the history of civilizations – Islam occupies a different position in the European imagination. Whereas the Jewish minority was often portrayed as an ‘enemy’ – or at least an oddity – within, Muslims were long seen as a direct external threat (Anidjar 2007: 6). Even though the Ottoman Empire gradually receded in military importance after the Turks<sup>14</sup> withdrew from the gates of Vienna in 1683, the image of Muslims as warlike empire-builders threatening continental Europe remained paramount in the Enlightenment imaginary. Even so, modern thought on the Middle East lost some of its earlier hostility (Quinn 2008: 55-56). The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generated a great amount of new information on Islam – in the form of travelers’ reports and literary translations – but most writings reveal the contradictory and fragmented views scholars had on the topic. Old stereotypes continued to be repeated alongside newer and more favorable observations. In both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an interest in the comparative study of religions led scholars to attempt more objective studies of Islam, comparing its beliefs and practices, its foundation and its history, with Christianity and Judaism (Stroumsa 2010: 135-136). George Sale’s influential translation of the *Qu’ran*, first published in 1734, provided a valuable resource for eighteenth-century scholars such as Voltaire (Elmarsafy 2008: 84).

<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Old Testament Jews were also positively invoked by authors establishing or celebrating nationalist identities. Adam Sutcliffe describes how throughout the seventeenth century there was a self-conscious identification of the nascent Dutch republic with the ancient Hebrew kingdom (2003: 27). As a ‘vulnerable and righteous nation, establishing a new and virtuous polity in sharp contrast with their Spanish oppressor’ there emerged a ‘rhetorical self-identification with the Ancient Jews’ (ibid: 45). The same was true for England: ‘The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 brought to the fore key elements of neo-Judaic national mythology: resilience, rejection of slavery by mightier opponents and a sense of Divine election’ (ibid).

<sup>14</sup> The terms ‘Turk’ ‘Ottoman’ and ‘Muslim’ became more or less synonymous in sixteenth-century Europe under the influence of the continuing military threat of the Ottomans (Elmarsafy 2009: 7).

The Orient also became a popularly exotic setting for musicians and playwrights. French and English translations of *One Thousand and One Nights* at the beginning of the eighteenth century further popularized the unique image of the Near East. Despite the popularity of these Oriental tales, eighteenth-century scholarly interest in Islam and Muslims is quite modest compared to the attention received by the Jews and their religion, and although Enlightenment authors sometimes assign similar properties to both religions, they also point out their differences or even explicitly oppose them. The two traditions thus play different roles in the work of Enlightenment scholars. Nevertheless, I want to argue it is fruitful to look at these overlapping and diverging conceptualizations of *both* Judaism and Islam.

Emphasizing the interconnectedness of these conceptualizations helps in placing the early modern treatment of these two religions within a longer history of European thought. For, as I will discuss in the next section, Enlightenment scholars could tap into centuries-old traditions of theological thought on the relations between these cognate monotheisms. Even though this history is characterized by highly polemical exchanges on the truth and falseness of the three traditions, Guy Stroumsa argues that the idea of “family-resemblance” between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is as old as the appearance of the third of these religions’ (2015: 62). This theological triangle is still recognized in the Enlightenment period – as can be illustrated, for example, by the many publications featuring and comparing the three prophets of these traditions<sup>15</sup> – but is radically dissolved in the nineteenth century when ‘both Judaism and Islam were relegated to “the East” and denied any real commonality with Christianity, the religion of Europe’ (ibid: 56). Looking at the way Judaism and Islam were perceived in the long eighteenth century can also help in understanding the profound shifts in the way the three monotheistic religions were understood to be related in the century that followed.

### ***Secularizing theological tropes***

Early modern scholars of Islam could ‘never imagine themselves as discoverers of a virgin land of the spirit’ (Stroumsa 2010: 124) as they could when studying newly discovered peoples in colonized territories. They inherited a long history of theological polemics concerning the religion, its prophet, and its history. From its inception, Islam had been perceived as a major threat to Christianity and had been described as ‘the worst of all heresies’ (ibid). Traditional Christian scholarship had described Islam using the explicitly theological notions of

<sup>15</sup> Stroumsa points out the eighteenth-century popularity of *Le Livre des Trois Imposteurs* and the

‘parable of the three rings’ in Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* (1779) (Stroumsa 2015: 60).

'blasphemy' and 'false religion'. Muhammad was often perceived through the Biblical category of 'false prophet' and described as the devil's helper. Luther's venomous descriptions of Islam were particularly influential. In his writings Islam was regularly described as Satan's army, for the Pope may have been 'the Spirit of the anti-Christ but the Turks were its body' (Quinn 2008: 43). Luther further repeatedly links the Muhammadans to 'the world' and 'the flesh', accusing them of enjoying worldly success in direct opposition to scripture 'which is antithetical to the world' (Almond 2011: 626).

These openly Christian theological characterizations of Islam occurred less frequently in the Enlightenment period but did not disappear completely. The English Orientalist George Sale (1697-1736), who produced the first accurate English translation of the Qur'an, still explained the birth of Islam by arguing it was God's punishment for the Christian church not 'living answerably to that most holy religion which they had received' (Sale cited in Hourani 1989: 232). God had made use of the talented Muhammad to successfully spread Islam, solely to reprimand Christians (Hourani 1989: 232). However, many modern scholars made an effort to study Islam more objectively, as a religion in its own right that could be compared to other religious systems of belief and behavior. As we will see however, theological tropes did not disappear, and the demythologizing of Islam and its founder – accompanied by an interest in its history and political organization – did not inevitably result in more positive evaluations. Although the link between Islam and 'worldliness' may have ceased to be argued for on the basis of scripture, it remained a salient point in the political depiction of Muslims as warlike conquerors, and in the idea of the founder Muhammad as driven by lust and ambition.

For similar reasons Nirenberg discusses the Enlightenment's preoccupation with Judaism with a sense of disappointment. Even the most critical of thinkers upheld traditionally derogatory notions of 'the Jew', 'adopted and adapted from the scriptural paradigms', that their claims proposed to overturn (Nirenberg 2013: 334). Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (2007/1670), in which he pleads for complete freedom of conscience and faith, and a radical divorce between scripture and truth, shows how even Enlightenment's most revolutionary ideas were developed against the backdrop of Christian supersessionism: the notion that Judaism had been superseded by the Christian religion, which was in all senses superior, and had overcome Jewish error. Although Spinoza targets the clergy of all faiths, be they 'Christian, Turk, Jew or gentile' (Spinoza 2007/1670: 7), his treatment of the different faiths is far from unbiased. Judaism and Jewish practice are discussed in order to expose the errors of revealed religion, and in this guise take up a large

part of the *Treatise*.<sup>16</sup> Examples of the supersessionist idiom used by Spinoza are found in his comparisons between Moses and Christ. While Moses spoke to God in human language, Spinoza states, Christ communicated directly with God. And while Christ appealed to rational and moral arguments to convince his followers, Moses relied on the Hebrews' fear of punishment and their desire for temporal rewards.

To put it bluntly, Spinoza translated Christian ideas about Jewish error and irrationality into secular terms, assigning to Jews and Judaism a role as enemy of reason that was very similar to the role of enemy of revelation assigned them by Christian theology, and using that role to Judaize revealed religion itself (Nirenberg 2013: 338).

As we shall see below, many other Enlightenment authors also relied on the familiar figure of the Jew derived from Christian theology. In formulating their ideas 'around and against those of traditional Christianity', states Adam Sutcliffe, Enlightenment scholars 'continued to work within a frame of reference that was largely conditioned by theological orthodoxies' (2008: 5). This chapter will thus also show how Enlightenment authors were able to present these 'ancient prejudices with a fresh veneer of secularism' (ibid: 7).

### ***Setting the boundaries of European civilization***

Pointing out the hidden theological remnants preserved in the work of scholars who are now often perceived as founders of secular thought is not the sole aim of this chapter. While the focus on the persistent nature of these Christian theological concepts suggests continuity, I also want to emphasize that the long eighteenth century was a period of transformation in which 'religion was remade and given new forms and meanings' (Sheehan 2003: 1077). One of these transformations is described by Jonathan Sheehan in *The Enlightenment Bible*, a book which meticulously describes the ways in which the Bible was transformed from a 'self-legitimizing text' read for the salvatory truths it contained, to something that could be seen as part of Western – or even national – culture. The Enlightenment was, he argued, 'precisely the moment when the authority of the Bible was reconstituted as a piece of the heritage of the West' (Sheehan 2005: xi).

This transformation was only possible by cutting away some strongly intertwined roots Christianity shared with Judaism and Islam. 'As Christianity was more and more conceived as the cultural capital of Europe, intellectuals and

<sup>16</sup> The centrality of this topic is illustrated by the fact that some clandestine French translations of the *Treatise* which were published after Spinoza's

death bore the title: *Traité des Cérémonies Superstitieuses des Juifs tant Anciens que Modernes* (Nirenberg 2013: 329).

scholars alike became deeply ambivalent to its genetic relations with Judaism, a Semitic religion of the ancient Near East' (Stroumsa 2015: 69-70). In what follows it will become clear that several Enlightenment discussions of Judaism pertain to the 'problem' of the Judaic origins of Christianity, and of European civilization more generally. These discourses contributed to a new conceptual framework in which the family-resemblance of the three Abrahamic religions was no longer self-evident and in which Christianity came to be 'perceived as essentially a European religion [...] thus managing to escape its Jewish, Near Eastern origin' (ibid: 59). A more radical version of this framework was created in the nineteenth century when the philological sciences constructed new taxonomies separating the Indo-European (or Indo-Aryan) from the Semitic languages in which both Hebrew and Arabic were grouped. These new classifications became a dominant way to categorize both the linguistic classes of people and their religions, 'hence, the categories of Semitic peoples and of Semitic religions' (ibid: 3; see also Anidjar 2007; Hourani 1989; Olender 1992). This separation, combined with new biological theories of race, not only led to a decline of interest in the peoples classified as Semites, but also generated open hostility towards them.

In the eighteenth century such a radical separation was not as yet everywhere observed. In his *Lettres Persanes* (1721) Montesquieu still confidently addressed the family resemblance of the three monotheisms by describing Christianity and Islam as branches growing from a Jewish stem (Stroumsa 2015: 66). However, several early modern scholars do attempt to define something like a specifically 'European' civilization that could be contrasted with other civilizations. Nikita Dhawan shows how the idea of Europe as a center from which other regions, peoples, cultures, and religions could be studied became part of the Enlightenment imagination:

Although the focus has primarily been on time, it is important to bear in mind that the Enlightenment association with and embeddedness in the geographical region "Europe" is a decisive aspect of its self-consciousness. From this perceived "center", the Enlightenment thinkers began to theorize the "peripheral" parts of the world, comparing their own societies and cultures with the rest of the world (Dhawan 2014: 25).

For such a center to be constructed it was especially urgent to demarcate Europe from the Near East in which its religious roots lay. Those authors wishing to uphold the authority of the church or of revealed Christianity do so by re-establishing it as a European religion. However, those scholars critical of revealed religion similarly try to create a Europe free from 'Eastern influences'. An example of this can be found in the work of one of the heroes of Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment*, the anti-religious

Baron d'Holbach. When he implores Europe to cast off its yoke of prejudice, he describes this prejudice as thoroughly Eastern and therefore foreign to Europeans:

Europe! Happy land where for so long a time the arts, sciences, and philosophy have flourished; you whose wisdom and power seem destined to command the rest of the world! Do you never tire of the false dreams invented by impostors in order to deceive the brutish slaves of the Egyptians? Then dare, oh Europe! Break the unbearable yoke of the prejudices by which you are afflicted. Leave to the stupid Hebrews, to the frenzied imbeciles, and to the cowardly and degraded Asiatics these superstitions which are as vile as they are mad; they were not meant for the inhabitants of your clime (D'Holbach in Nirenberg 2013: 356-357).

Even such a secularist thinker as D'Holbach thus feels the need to break the bonds between Europe and the Near East. D'Holbach's quote illustrates David Nirenberg's claim that certain Enlightenment scholars *Judaized* religion itself. By describing religion as a Hebrew and Eastern invention, D'Holbach exculpates Europe from all things religious. In this narrative Europe casts off these foreign influences and rises to dominate the world that is still afflicted by 'false dreams'.

### **Judaism and Islam and the Problems of Religion**

In the next part of this chapter I will address four themes central to Enlightenment discourses regarding religion and to the way Jews and Muslims were portrayed. I shall discuss four different aspects of religion which were problematized by early modern scholars and will focus on the ways these characteristics were projected onto Judaism and Islam, and Jews and Muslims. Before doing so, I will briefly say something about the selection of sources this chapter draws upon, and its place in the broader field of discussions seeking to comprehend the Enlightenment period.

When discussing Enlightenment representations of Islam, and especially its treatments of Judaism, one inevitably enters an ongoing debate about the nature of the Enlightenment project, a debate which touches upon the question of whether 'the Enlightenment' can ultimately be seen as fundamentally emancipatory and egalitarian, or if in fact the period upheld old prejudices and inequalities and even produced new ones perhaps.<sup>17</sup> This

<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972/1947) famously connects the Enlightenment period and the 'instrumental reason' they attribute to it, to the violence and fascism of the twentieth century. A critique of Enlightenment rationality is also developed in Foucault's discussions of 'disciplinary society' which excludes non-rational subjects (1977). A second intensely debated topic is

the Enlightenment's implication in colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial scholars developed a range of critiques pointing out the period's contribution to creating racial, cultural, ethnic, and national hierarchies (see for example Dhawan 2014; Eze 1997; Festa and Carey 2009; Hulme 1990; Stoler 2013; Tricoire 2017).

protracted discussion was famously revitalized by Jonathan Israel's series of books in which he distinguishes a *radical* from a moderate or *mainstream* Enlightenment (Israel 2001; 2009).<sup>18</sup> The Enlightenment period, he argues, is the source of emancipatory values such as freedom, (racial) equality and democracy. These values were defended, however, not by scholars like Voltaire, Hume, or Locke who belonged to the mainstream current, but by a smaller group of radicals inspired by Spinoza. It is the radical Enlightenment – consisting of thinkers such as Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot, and D'Holbach – which should be seen as the source of the liberal and democratic principles underlying modern secularized societies. The scope of this thesis is not sufficient to further take up this particular debate, but it might be helpful to briefly address how the topics discussed in this chapter and the next relate to it.

It is important to emphasize that the vast amount of publications produced by early modern scholars do not contain uniform, unequivocal representations of Judaism and Islam. Even within the work of a thinker such as Voltaire, several different and often contradictory ideas on both religions can be found.<sup>19</sup> Both Judaism and Islam were fiercely criticized, but Enlightenment thinkers also stressed their favorable qualities. Islam's reputation for tolerance, for example, often illustrated by invoking the religious freedom prevailing in the Ottoman empire, was frequently praised, as was the 'pure' religion of the ancient Hebrews – often when trying to undermine the supremacy of Christianity (Hourani 1989; Schechter 2003). Moreover, many Enlightenment thinkers – such as Locke, Bayle, Spinoza, and Voltaire – developed ideas of radical tolerance and religious freedom that explicitly included Judaism and Islam. Voltaire repeatedly denounced the persecution of the Jews and used it as proof of the unworthiness of the Church (Hertzberg 1968: 280). The emancipation of the Jews in France in 1791 – and subsequently in other parts of Europe under Napoleon's control – which granted them civil and political rights, can be connected to these ardent pleas for the Jewish case.

Sutcliffe, therefore, rejects the idea that Enlightenment attitudes towards Jews can be univocally classified as anti-Judaic or anti-Semitic. The ambiguity in the works of many scholars leads him to oppose the thesis put forward by Arthur Hertzberg in *The French Enlightenment and the Jews. The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (1968), in which he tries to close the historical gap

<sup>18</sup> The first comprehensive study of the Radical Enlightenment is *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (1981) by Margaret C. Jacob.

<sup>19</sup> Schechter argues that Judaism was often related to concepts that came in 'binary pairs' – 'primitive or modern, obstinate or malleable' but these 'oppositions were highly unstable. Even within a single work the Jews could migrate between poles' (2003: 37).

between the medieval persecution of Jews and the political anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Hertzberg claims that the Enlightenment – and Voltaire’s work in particular – was the vital link between these two periods, Sutcliffe argues that attitudes toward Judaism in this period cannot simply be ranged on any ‘one-dimensional positive-to-negative spectrum’ (2003: 9). He therefore makes use of Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ‘allosemitism’ – the idea that Jews were seen both as radically *different* and as defying clear categorization – as the main characteristic of Enlightenment attitudes toward Judaism. Jews, Bauman adds, ‘served as the waste yard onto which all the ambivalence squeezed out of the universe could be dumped so that the self-identity of the Christian world could be of one block and at peace with itself’ (Bauman 1998: 148). Like philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Yirmiyahu Yovel, Bauman puts forward a view in which Jews and Judaism serve as a mirror in which European identity problems are being reflected (Arendt 2007: 68-69; Yovel 1998: xi).

Allosemitism, Sutcliffe argues, seeing Jews as the everlasting exception, could inspire both admiration and hostility and is therefore helpful to understand the ambivalence underlying Enlightenment attitudes toward Judaism. However, I would argue that with regard to perceptions of Judaism, even this ambivalence had its limits. As we will see, even those authors who expressed positive attitudes toward Judaism often upheld dominant stereotypes (Hertzberg 1968: 55). Moreover, those who praised the Old Testament and Mosaic Law as pure and undistorted forms of natural religion criticized the religious practices of their Jewish contemporaries. The Talmud and the tradition of Rabbinical interpretation were almost uniformly dismissed as a heap of superstition. These authors thus presented Judaism as an ‘original source of wisdom and the foundation of an admirable political model that had been gradually perverted by false prophets and malicious priests’ (Lucci 2008: 179). This story of degeneration thereby separated contemporary Jews ‘from their patrimony’ and threatened them with ‘historicist obsolescence’ (Sheehan 2005: 215-216).

Importantly, negative perceptions of both Judaism and Islam are not confined to a specific strand of the Enlightenment. As we already saw in the words of d’Holbach, what Israel identifies as the Enlightenment’s ‘radical strand’ is not exempted from prejudicial views of Jews and Muslims, or the construction of an image of European civilization that explicitly excludes these groups. In what follows it will become clear that certain dominant representations of Judaism and Islam were ‘invoked with equal intensity across the entire spectrum of the Enlightenment’ (Sutcliffe 2003: 14).

In the next part of the chapter I will focus on the topics of fanaticism, legalism or political religion, particularism, and materialism, and try to establish the meaning of these concepts by looking at the writings of various Enlightenment thinkers. Because these concepts provide the main structural basis of the following paragraphs, I will not provide a chronological survey of Enlightenment views on Judaism and Islam,<sup>20</sup> but will highlight the thoughts of Enlightenment authors whose ideas on these themes have been noteworthy or influential. However, selecting sources from the enormous amount of writing on these topics cannot be other than somewhat arbitrary. By focusing on the thought of Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) and Voltaire (1694-1778), I have chosen two proponents of what have come to be understood by many – in the wake of Jonathan Israel – as the radical and the moderate Enlightenment. Spinoza wrote in the early Enlightenment Dutch Republic, and Voltaire was a prominent member of the French *philosophes* publishing his work throughout the eighteenth-century *high* Enlightenment. A focus on the work of these two authors will thus reveal that engaging with these topics was a widespread activity, appearing in the work of many thinkers writing in different times and places.

Most importantly, Spinoza and Voltaire are both currently conceived of as authors occupying a central position in the canon of liberal thought. Spinoza's pleas for complete freedom of conscience and Voltaire's famous appeals for extensive religious tolerance have made them into prominent figures within a narrative of a philosophical Enlightenment in which the principles underlying our secular liberal democracies were first formulated. Even though this narrative has been fiercely criticized, these authors have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the ways we now conceive of religion and of its proper role in society. The work of Spinoza, Voltaire, and the other authors discussed here, is part of an intellectual legacy taught in academic curricula on the history of secular thought, religious freedom, and non-establishment, and is also incorporated in broader introductions to political philosophy. Within these curricula of political philosophy and theory, early modern views on Judaism, Islam and other 'Others' are often – when discussed at all – too neatly compartmentalized. Knowledge of Enlightenment views on these 'Others', and its implication in creating ethno-cultural hierarchies, is generally produced by scholars in the fields of Jewish studies, or in postcolonial thought with a focus on Orientalism. This knowledge might be seen as valuable, but within political theory it is seldom treated as

<sup>20</sup> **Much in-depth work has been done charting these characterizations of Judaism and Islam, Jews and Muslims, in the work of early modern European scholars. For an overview see for example Almond, *The History of Islam in German Thought. From Leibniz to Nietzsche* (2010); Bevilacqua, A. *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (2018);**

**Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an. The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam* (2009); Kalmar, *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (2010); Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (2003); Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews. Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (2003).**

capable of shedding new light on fundamental aspects of these Enlightenment thinkers' views on, say, the relationship between state, politics, and religion, or religious freedom and toleration. In what follows I will relate Enlightenment views of Judaism and Islam to five dimensions of religion. A discussion of these five problematic features will provide insights to the ways in which these authors tried to define and reshape what religion was, and what it should be.

### ***Fanaticism and the imagination***

In *Fanaticism, on the Uses of an Idea* Alberto Toscano argues that the Enlightenment is often characterized by identifying 'its nemesis of choice' or anti-self: "fanaticism" (2010: 101). He emphasizes however, that 'fanaticism', and the related concept 'enthusiasm', were elusive enemies. The 'simple trope of fanaticism as anti-Enlightenment and Enlightenment as anti-fanaticism' (ibid: 109) however, is too reductive to enable us to understand the debates regarding these topics. Not only did philosophers disagree about the exact definition of 'the fanatic', they were also divided on the question of how *much* fanaticism, or which *types* of fanaticism, were congruent with the notion of a stable political community. It is to these multifaceted discussions we shall now turn for seeing how the Enlightenment 'remade religion' and debated its acceptable forms. Within these debates we also find several representations both of Judaism, as 'the very origins of fanatical irrationality', and of Islam, which many Enlightenment philosophers considered to have been founded by the quintessential fanatic: the prophet Muhammad.

Beginning with Deleyre's entry on fanaticism in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts* (1751-1772) Toscano shows the concept's wide range of uses. Fanaticism, says Deleyre, is 'superstition put into practice', a 'blind and passionate zeal [...], causing people to commit ridiculous, unjust, and cruel actions' (2009/1756). To illustrate this, Deleyre provides a comprehensive list of absurd and contradictory rituals, and violent acts of bloodshed committed by people of different faiths. Although his examples reveal several ethnocentric stereotypes, fanaticism within Christianity and the fanaticism of imperialism are also discussed.

Although Deleyre does not provide an answer to the question of where to locate the core of fanaticism, he does highlight a prevalent characteristic. Fanaticism is described as a certain mental state or disease, in which 'the extravagance of the imagination is pushed out of the natural boundaries of reason and life' (Deleyre cited in Toscano 2010: 104). This idea of fanaticism as an illness connected to an unruly imagination – which, as we shall see, is further developed by Kant – returns with Deleyre's definition of fanaticism as a false consciousness abusing sacred things and which 'enslaves religion to the whims of imagination

and the unruliness of the passions' (ibid). This mental disposition is, in turn, connected to a variety of problematic attitudes and behaviors. From reading Deleyre's entry we can conclude that fanaticism leads to absurd, irrational rituals, false prophecy, intolerance, and bloodshed. It is a trait Deleyre also relates to a form of what we would now call fundamentalism: 'We can [...] call fanatics all those excessive minds who interpret the maxims of religion to the letter and who rigorously follow the letter' (2009/1756).

The causes of fanaticism, says Deleyre, are manifold. They can be located in the absurd dogmas of certain religions and can disturb the minds of the believer. They are also to be found in 'atrocious morals' and in the 'confusion of duties', when 'capricious ideas have become precepts and slight omissions are called great crimes' (ibid). But Deleyre also discusses external causes and points out how intolerance and the persecution of peoples and religions can breed new fanatics.

As did many Enlightenment *philosophes*, Deleyre introduces Muhammad as the archetypical fanatic. While he believes Muhammad became an impostor at a later age – another popular Enlightenment theory I will discuss below – the young Muhammad was a fanatic. It was his fanaticism that made him an inspirer of other young believers (Toscano 2010: 101). In various articles of the *Encyclopédie* this image of Muhammad is prominent. Rebecca Joubin states that Muhammad is persistently represented as the irrational enemy of reason, who used enthusiasm to inspire the credulous masses. In the entry *Saracens or Arabs* Diderot states that the fanatic Muhammad added his 'sublime dreams to some scraps torn from the books of the Jews and Christians and cut the throats of those who hesitated to regard those chapters as inspired work' (Diderot cited in Joubin 2000: 201). Muhammad's followers, the early Caliphs, are presented throughout the encyclopedia as ignorant men whose imagination was easily shaken (Joubin 2000: 203). In the *Encyclopédie* the success of Islam is also repeatedly attributed to the fanaticism of these leaders:

If ever any power threatened the whole earth, it was that of these caliphs, for they had the rights derived from throne and altar, from the sword of justice and from [popular] enthusiasm. Their orders amounted to oracles, and their soldiers to so many fanatics (Jaucourt 2005/1765).

In Voltaire's play *Fanaticism, or Mohamed the Prophet* (1741) Muhammad, the title notwithstanding, is not portrayed as a religious zealot, but as a cunning impostor. He is, however, able to fanaticize young followers, like Voltaire's protagonist Séide. The play opposes the immoral and violent fanaticism of Muhammad's followers and celebrates the stable public order of sheikh Zophir which is 'built on custom and observance' (Toscano 2010: 110). Séide, who in his fanatic delusion

murders his father and commits near-incest with his sister, destroys the ‘calm of custom’ and disrupts even the most sacred traditions, namely familial ties (Toscano 2006: 2; 2010: 110).

The same notion of fanaticism was often employed to describe Judaism. Voltaire – whose venomous attacks on the Jews astonished both enemies and friends alike (Hertzberg 1968) – uses the term generously to characterize both ancient Hebrews and their descendants: Jews living in eighteenth-century Europe. In his *Letter of Memmius to Cicero* (1771) Voltaire has the character of an ancient Roman, reporting on the Jews, say the following:

They are, all of them, born with raging fanaticism in their hearts, just as the Bretons and the Germans are born with blond hair. I would not be in the least bit surprised if these people would not someday become deadly to the human race (Voltaire cited in Hertzberg 1968: 300).<sup>21</sup>

Of the one hundred and eighteen articles in Voltaire’s main work, the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), thirty or more attack the Jews. He accuses these ‘most abominable people in the world’ of ignorance, barbarism, and superstition and warns for their intolerance (Nirenberg 2013: 354; Poliakov 1975: 88). While Voltaire’s criticism of the Hebrews and the Old Testament clearly has the aim of undermining the foundation of *all* revealed religion, his attacks on Judaism are so venomous that most scholars deny they are merely instrumental (Hertzberg 1968; Nirenberg 2013; Poliakov 1975). In the essay *We Must Take Sides* he ridicules all major religious traditions but judges the Jews the worst of all. Speaking directly to the Jews he states:

The Kaffirs, Hottentots, and blacks of New Guinea are more reasonable and decent beings than your Jewish ancestors were. You have surpassed all nations in exorbitant legends, bad conduct, and barbarism. You are paying for it; it is your destiny (Voltaire 1912).

<sup>21</sup> Here Voltaire treats fanaticism as an inherent feature of the Jew and compares it to a biological trait. While it is often argued that the anti-Judaism of the Enlightenment differs from the biological or racial anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such a distinction is not always easy to make. The question of whether it was possible to ‘regenerate’ the Jews was an ongoing topic of debate in the eighteenth century and those who did not believe in this possibility often pointed out certain inbred characteristics. The problematics of distinguishing between racial, ethnic and religious discrimination can be illustrated by looking at one example: an English pamphlet opposing the naturalization of a small

group of Jewish merchants in 1753. After stating that Jews should not be allowed to become English because they have asked for the crucifixion of Christ it goes on to state: ‘what can be expected from such a Race, can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots’ (Rabin 2006: 162). Furthermore, as discussed above the portrayal of the Jews as Eastern or Asiatic was a prominent feature of the thought of many Enlightenment scholars who aimed to construe a secular origin story for what they perceived as European civilization. For a critical reflection on the distinction between racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (see Jansen and Meer 2020; Topolski 2018; Westerduin forthcoming).

Like Deleyre's, Voltaire's account of fanaticism is not unambiguous, but it is clear that he believes it should be understood as a certain trait of mind or character which can lead to violence. Fanatics harm others in pursuit of their own beliefs. The insanity of killing in the name of a deity is a central theme in his play on Muhammad and Voltaire's entry on fanaticism in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) contains various examples of violence, war and sacrifice committed by different religious sects. When it comes to possible solutions for preventing or overcoming fanaticism Voltaire is very pessimistic – 'Once fanaticism has gangrened the brain of any man, the disease may be regarded as nearly incurable' (Voltaire 1824a/1764: 172) – and he is especially skeptical about the force of laws preventing or sanctioning fanatical behavior:

To oppose laws to cases of such a description would be like reading a decree of council to a man in a frenzy. The persons in question are fully convinced that the Holy Spirit which animates and fills them is above all laws; that their own enthusiasm is, in fact, the only law which they are bound to obey. What can be said in answer to a man who says he will rather obey God than men, and who consequently feels certain of meriting heaven by cutting your throat? (ibid).

According to Toscano, Deleyre and Voltaire firmly disagree on fanaticism's possible value. While Voltaire unambiguously condemns the phenomenon, Deleyre defends certain forms of fanaticism, such as the fanaticism of 'the patriot' without which 'nothing great could ever be achieved'.<sup>22</sup> Fanaticism is a motivational force, 'it lifts men up' while superstition alone degrades them. It is this force that makes it so dangerous; far more dangerous than impiety, for 'have we ever seen sects of unbelievers gather into mobs and march with weapons against the Divinity? Their souls are too weak to spill human blood'. However, some 'incentive or strength' is required to practice a good life (Deleyre 2009/1756).

A manageable fanaticism is unimaginable to Voltaire, for whom the opposition between fanaticism and toleration is crucial. His entire oeuvre is structured as an opposition between 'pathological militancy and the virtues of indifference' (Toscano 2010: 106). Voltaire is not opposed to religion per se but concerned about its volatility: 'the manner in which it can so easily abet destructive frenzies, or mutate into *l'infâme*, that contemptible mixture of superstition and fanaticism, the religious passion of the crowds and partisan spirit, persecution and blind dogmatism' (ibid). While this opposition is indeed an appropriate characterization of the early Voltaire, in his later work he seems to make some room for the motivational forces of 'enthusiasm'.

<sup>22</sup> In the next chapter I will say more on these debates on the possible value of fanaticism, a

debate that connects to a more general discussion on the merits of 'affect' in politics.

In *The Enlightenment Qur'an* (2009) Ziad Elmarsafy shows how Voltaire's position on Islam and its founder changes throughout his life. In *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations* (1756) and in *The Philosophy of History* (1765) Voltaire presents what can be read as a rehabilitation of Islam and exhibits great admiration for Islam's political success which will be further discussed in a later section. The *Essay* attributes the successful spread of Islam to the enthusiasm of the early Muslims, which was productively channeled by Muhammad. Although Voltaire still speaks of the 'enflamed imagination, which is the heritage of the early Arabs' (Voltaire cited in Elmarsafy 2009: 94), he replaces the dominant image of fanatical hordes of violent Islamic conquerors with the more positive image of a group of believers whose enthusiasm proved contagious. The distinction between fanaticism and enthusiasm, which was not made explicit in Voltaire's early work, seems to be that fanaticism is ultimately destructive, while enthusiasm 'looks outward and builds empires' (Elmarsafy 2009: 93).

In the following section I will further discuss the notions of violence and intolerance with which Judaism and Islam were so often associated, and which, according to some, were traits of all revealed religions. Firstly, however, I will examine another characteristic many Enlightenment authors attached to both the Jewish and Islamic faiths. This idea seems to be in direct opposition to the image of Jews and Muslims as fanatical zealots, passionately defending their irrational faith. It associates the two traditions instead with a lack of sincere, spiritual faith or belief and depicts them as rule-bound systems, founded by lawgivers, or, in more derogatory terms, by frauds, calculating impostors, and immoral politicians. Despite this apparent contradiction there is also a connection between the two tropes and the way they are problematized by Enlightenment scholars. Firstly, an empirical relationship is assumed between calculating religious leaders who are able to inspire fanaticism or control the fanatical energies of their followers. On a more theoretical level both fanaticism – defined either as imagination run wild or a claim to divine inspiration – and legalism – in which religion is seen as comprehensive system of rules to be followed – are problematized because of their inhibitive effects upon individual reason. In both cases believers submit to an external power and forego their capacity for autonomous judgement. This tension between certain forms of religion and rational autonomy is central to the work of Immanuel Kant, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

### ***Lawgivers and politicians***

As discussed above, Spinoza's depiction of Judaism relies on representations familiar from theological debates. One of the supersessionist notions prevailing in his thought is the idea that Judaism is a religion of *the law*, while Christianity is

a spiritual or moral religion of love. Spinoza's comparison between Moses and Christ illustrates how this opposition, which was prominent in early Christian discussions on the position of Jews, returns in his *Political-Theological Treatise* (2007/1670).

Moses, claims Spinoza, demanded obedience to the laws he received by promising rewards and prosperity to his followers, and threatening transgressors with severe punishment. Christ by contrast, appealed to rational and moral arguments to convince believers. In the New Testament the moral doctrines that underlie laws and commandments are explained; the Old Testament, in contrast, does not contain moral principles, only laws and ceremonies. The idea of 'the Jew' as worshipper of the letter is used to ridicule those Christians who believe that scripture should be considered as literal truth. Spinoza, who argues the only truth contained in scripture is that of basic morality – a morality which he claims can also be found rationally – thus discards the importance of Jewish tradition when he insists that the true covenant 'is no longer written in ink or on stone tablets but rather on the heart by the spirit of God' (Spinoza 2007/1670: 230).

Spinoza, however, did not pass judgement on this phase of Jewish history. The manner in which Moses ruled the Hebrews was demanded by the circumstances; his followers were a people 'accustomed to Egyptian superstition, who were primitive and reduced to the most abject slavery' (ibid: 38). It was therefore impossible to teach them about the Deity 'like a philosopher'. Moses consequently operated as a lawgiver 'compelling them to be moral by legal authority' (ibid: 26), and treated his people as parents would treat 'children prior to the age of reason':

For this reason the right way of living or the true life and worship and love of God was more servitude to them than true liberty and the grace and gift of God. For Moses commanded them to love God and observe his Law in order to show their gratitude for God's past blessings (liberation from Egyptian servitude, etc.); he also thoroughly frightens them with menaces should they transgress these laws while at the same time promising many rewards if they would observe them (ibid: 38-39).

Further on, Spinoza emphasizes that religion was introduced into the commonwealth 'so that the people would do its duty more from devotion than from fear' (ibid: 74). Most importantly, Spinoza stresses that a stable society providing security and comfort can only be established on the basis of a body of 'fixed laws' binding for all. The Mosaic Law was thus essential for stabilizing the polity of the Hebrews and securing their material welfare and independent state.

Hence, unlike many Enlightenment authors who were influenced by him, Spinoza did not use the conception of Judaism as a 'political' religion or 'religion

of the law' merely to show the faith's inferiority.<sup>23</sup> His position on both historical and contemporary Jews is nevertheless ambiguous; at times he includes himself among the Jews, and in the *Treatise* he suggests that even though the Jews are stubborn, they are 'closer to piety than many Christians' (Nirenberg 2013: 334). In his discussion of the work of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, however, Spinoza claims that all Jews despised reason and philosophy, which was only accessible to the Gentiles and the Greeks. This idea, Dirk Westerkamp shows, was also central to the German Enlightenment historiography of philosophy. Eighteenth-century thinkers tried to establish a 'universal historical order of philosophical discourse' (Westerkamp 2008: 534) and fiercely debated the place of Jewish philosophy – both ancient and medieval – in this order. Several authors claim Jewish thought should be considered childlike, and thus unphilosophical, because it is based solely on revelation. Westerkamp shows the paradoxical nature of many of these reflections on Judaism and Jewish thought, which represented it either as misguided by a 'bewildered imagination' or as 'formal reasoning' which led to 'unphilosophical Rabbinism' and slavery to the law (ibid: 542). The Enlightenment historiographers discussed by Westerkamp often viewed the Islamic and Judaic traditions of thought as closely related (ibid: 536). Here again, a demarcation is made between a Greco-European and an oriental way of thinking. Philosophy professor Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764) discerned different developmental phases of philosophy: the non-Hellenic 'morgenländische Philosophie' Jewish thought belonged to, and should be seen, he argued, as the childhood of humankind (Heumann cited in Westerkamp 2008: 538). This phase of purely empirical thought lacked logical and philosophical reasoning and thus produced no truths – looking for truth in Jewish thought, Heumann claimed, could be compared 'with digging through a muck heap in order to find pearls' (ibid: 537-538). The second, juvenile, phase of humanity extended from 'Greek philosophy to late-antique Christian thought' (ibid: 538). In this phase Heumann located all major accomplishments in ethics, physics and logical reasoning. It was this phase which contemporary thinkers, who belonged to the phase of adulthood, should build upon.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Not only did Spinoza's radical followers often take a less nuanced position on the nature of Judaism, they also at times, tried to hide the philosopher's Jewish roots. His 'ethnic particularity', Sutcliffe shows, was thought to inhibit the 'universalization of his image' [...] 'Claiming Spinoza fully for radical philosophy thus required the erasure of all traces of Jewishness from his identity' (Sutcliffe 2003: 143-144). Sutcliffe shows how they at times even tried to 'whitewash' his portrait, publishing his work with an illustration that hid his Judeo-Portuguese features.

<sup>24</sup> Westerkamp argues that these eighteenth-century discussions on the place of Jewish thought should be given a more prominent place in contemporary discussions on orientalism. 'The Enlightenment historiography of philosophy viewed the Islamic and Judaic philosophical traditions as closely related' (Westerkamp 2008: 534-535).

Even those authors who argued that parts of ancient Judaism could be understood as a ‘source and model of primitive “natural religion”’ often held a much-conflicted stance towards the tradition as a whole and to Rabbinic Judaism in particular (Sutcliffe 2003: 18). English deist John Toland, who idealized certain elements of ancient Judaism, argued that the tradition had rapidly degenerated. He was contemptuous of rituals and ceremonies ‘which he saw as marking the beginning of the descent of philosophically pure religion into elaborate systems of Priestly domination’ but believed that the Mosaic Law had been rational and restrained (ibid: 200).<sup>25</sup> The seventeenth-century Hebraist John Selden studied Rabbinical literature to argue that the seven Noahite principles which, according to the Rabbis, contained universal ethical commandments, formed the core of ‘natural law’ (Stroumsa 2010: 47). Even so, he attested to the errors of post-biblical Judaism and presented Jewish Rabbinic law as ‘an obscure and obsolete cultural artefact’ (Sutcliffe 2003: 48) reproducing the position of most Enlightenment authors who saw it as the quintessence of useless learning.

Interestingly, several eighteenth-century *philosophes* enthusiastically embraced the Karaites, a Jewish ‘dissenting sect, on the margins of an already marginal group’, members of which could not be found in France (Schechter 2003: 45). This group, they believed, had been able to preserve the simplicity and morality of ancient Judaism. The Karaites received an extraordinary amount of attention, for example in the work of Marquis D’Argens but also in Diderot and Joucourt’s contributions to the *Encyclopédie*. In their glorification of the Karaites, who rejected the Talmud and its commentaries, the *philosophes* again problematized the religion of their Jewish contemporaries (Schechter 2003: 45-60).

Jewish legalism was also one of the main objects of Voltaire’s ridicule in many of his critiques of revealed religion. The Mosaic Law is portrayed as an arbitrary and illogical set of rules, the inaccuracy of which is enthusiastically displayed by Voltaire: ‘In this law it is forbidden to eat eels, because they have no scales; and hares, because they chew the cud, and have cloven feet. Apparently, the Jews had hares different from ours’ (Voltaire 1824b/1764: 214). In Voltaire’s writings, as in those of Spinoza, Moses appears as a lawgiver. However, while Spinoza argues that the Mosaic Law was adapted to suit the circumstances of the ancient Hebrews, Voltaire claims their law was influenced by the pagan rites and ceremonies prevalent in ancient Egypt and Persia. He introduces Moses as someone who might indeed have led a group of ‘Arabs’ out of Egypt – ‘either as a troop of unruly brigands, or a people infected with leprosy’ (Voltaire 1836/1764: 164) – but

<sup>25</sup> Toland believed that the early Jewish customs and laws were shaped by Egyptian influences. After Moses’ death ‘superfluous rites and superstitions’ – such as circumcision and sacrifices – were

introduced that caused the Jews’ degeneration ‘from the philosophically eternal; but culturally Egyptian pantheistic simplicity that had imbued their original Mosaic cult’ (Sutcliffe 2003: 200).

was certainly no competent legislator. Moses is instead recast as ‘an incompetent barbarous tribal chief’ (Sutcliffe 2005: 240): ‘Their law must appear, to every polished people, as singular as their conduct; if it were not divine, it would seem to be the law of savages beginning to assemble themselves into a nation’ (Voltaire 1824b/1764: 214).

As did the German historiographers, and following Spinoza, Voltaire emphasizes the thoroughly unphilosophical nature of Jewish thought. He illustrates this in a rather erratic manner, by arguing that the Mosaic Law does not state anything about the immortality of the soul, nor does it mention the rewards of an afterlife. He goes on to claim that the Jews did not develop astronomy, or geometry, and never instituted public schools – ‘they had not even a term in their language to express such an institution’ – and that their calendar was less accurate than that of Mexicans and Peruvians (ibid: 213). The Jews ‘borrowed everything in their culture from others’ (Hertzberg 1968: 303). Voltaire portrayed them as plagiarizers even when it came to their religion (Voltaire 1901/ 1764). There was ‘not a single page of the Jewish books that was not stolen, mostly from Homer’ (Hertzberg 1968: 303). In denying the Jews any creativity Voltaire again aims to undermine their central role in Europe’s founding narrative.

Voltaire leaves some doubt as to whether the notions concerning Jewish law, legalism, and the Jews’ unphilosophical way of thinking used to describe the ancient Hebrews, are directly applicable to contemporary Jews. However, it is clear that he uses their ‘wretched history’ to justify prevalent notions – including his own – of Jewish barbarism: ‘Once more; it is very pardonable for mere human reason simply to see, in such a history, the barbarous stupidity of the first ages of a savage people’ (Voltaire 1824c/1764: 94). In this argument Voltaire thoroughly ‘blurs the distinction between the content of the [Jewish] laws and the inflexible psychology of legalism that for him they embody’ (Sutcliffe 2009: 240).

Like Moses, Muhammad was sometimes represented as a lawgiver or politician. Although as legislators and community founders both men were admired by some Enlightenment authors such as Rousseau, Spinoza, and Boulainvilliers, they were more often depicted as cunning impostors, using the credulity of their peoples to fulfil their own ambitions. Imposture theory, states Peter Harrison, was very popular during both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and took a variety of forms. It was used to argue against the power of the clergy (priestly imposture) or to attack the foundation of all revealed religion. Moses, Muhammad, and – somewhat less often – Christ were accused of being impostors (Harrison 2002: 73-77). An anonymous pamphlet named *Le Vie et L’Esprit de M. Benoit de Spinoza* (1719), soon to be retitled *Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, started circulating in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Rumors of the

existence of such a radical and blasphemous work, in which the truth of the three monotheistic religions was denied, had circulated since the Middle Ages (Stroumsa 2010: 137). The eighteenth-century pamphlet was a curious mixture of Spinozism and anti-religious polemic. It claimed that all religions were established on the fear and ignorance of the people and that religious founders and priests had used this fear for their own material gain. There had, according to the pamphlet, always been madmen claiming that God had spoken to them. The most ambitious deceivers – Moses, Muhammad and Jesus – had given new laws to their peoples, while claiming these had a divine origin (ibid: 138).

Two other early Enlightenment works helped popularize the representation of Muhammad as an impostor, a representation which is closely related to Islam's association with despotism and violence. The first was Pierre Bayle's *The Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), in which he argued against the medieval idea that Muhammad was a false prophet 'sincerely deluded by the devil' and instead sought a naturalistic explanation for the rise of Islam (Almond 2003: 413). Most influential was Humphrey Prideaux's *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* (1697). This work, which drew from second-hand Arabic sources and from anti-Muslim Christian polemics, was presented as an historical account of Muhammad's life, and although Prideaux's contemporaries criticized its curious mix of historical and controversial polemical elements, it was imitated by numerous contemporaries and, forty years later, by Voltaire in his influential play about Muhammad.

The clergyman and orientalist Prideaux (1648-1724) claims Muhammad is driven by two dominant passions, namely lust and political ambition. This is illustrated by the way in which he chose to establish an empire and by his attachments to many women. His political ambition was also directly linked to 'his and Islam's later use of force to spread religious, social and political unity' (Almond 2003: 416). Prideaux warns his readers that the idea that Islam was to be 'appropriated by the sword' is central to the universal doctrine of Muslims (ibid). This notion that Islam could be characterized by its use of force became widespread and was often used to argue for the truth of Christianity. While Islam's success was solely based on violent conquest, a 'true' religion didn't need the use of violence to spread its faith. In another venomous attack that opposes peaceful Christianity to violent Islam Isaac Barrow – like Prideaux a prominent member of the Anglican church – declares: 'It diffused itself by rage and terrour of arms; convincing men's minds only by the sword, and using no argument's but blows' (cited in Almond 2003: 417).

It is Montesquieu who develops a full-blown theory of Islamic despotism by using the idea that Muhammad was an ambitious politician who convinced his followers by fraud or by force. Fear, states Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*,

is the principle of despotic governments. The Islamic religion is represented as 'a fear added to fear' because of the 'astonishing respect which [the peoples in Mohammedan empires] have for their prince' (1989/1748: 61). He makes a distinction between the Christian religion, which is presented as more suited for moderate governments, and Islam, as one intimately implicated in despotic government. The relationship between Islam and despotism is further explained by looking at both climatological and environmental factors influencing the inhabitants of different parts of the world. Different religions, claims Montesquieu, are suited to different climates, environments, and forms of government.

Demythologizing the figures of Muhammad and Moses did not inevitably lead to a negative evaluation of these founders. While seen as imposters they were often portrayed as tricksters and manipulators, using the credulity of their people for their own material and political gain, they were at other times described as capable lawgivers. This ambivalence towards Muhammad is present in Voltaire's work. In his play *Fanaticism, or Mohamed the Prophet* (1741), Muhammad appears as a self-serving manipulator, who uses violence to dispose of his critics. Later in his life Voltaire's attitude toward Islam became more favorable; in *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations* (1756) Muhammad is described as a skillful legislator 'who gave the Arabians the best law he could' (Elmarsafy 2009: 86). Moreover, Voltaire goes on to suggest that Muhammad helped to produce the greatest change of opinion the world had ever known, and expresses his admiration for Muhammad's achievements and the rapid spread of Islam. He also questions the common view that Muhammad was a despot, claiming that in the vast Muslim empire it was the Islamic law contained in the Qur'an, and not its leader, which ruled 'despotiquement' (Elmarsafy 2009: 90).

Interestingly, in Voltaire's argument, Judaism is constantly employed as a counterexample. Both the Muslims and the early Jews are described as harsh and warlike people. But while Islam was successful in conquering vast areas of land and bringing many people under its control, Judaism was not. Voltaire establishes his admiration for Muhammad by contrasting him to Moses who is portrayed as an impotent leader. While Muhammad fights alongside his followers, Moses leads his people on an endless quest to a supposed promised land. Moreover, the God of Israel is the prime mover and Moses entirely depends on his miracles, which 'shows that he can only be guided by the arm of the Almighty' (Voltaire cited in Elmarsafy 2009: 116).

In *The Philosophy of History* (1765) Voltaire questions the dominant notion that Islam was a particularly violent religion. Again, he does so by comparing their practices of conquest to those of the Jews:

The Arabs were never seen invading their neighbors like ravished carnivorous beasts, nor were they seen slaughtering the weak, claiming divine order as an excuse [...] I sincerely believe that they have no relationship to the small Jewish nation that has become the object and foundation of our so-called universal histories, in which a certain category of authors forget three-quarters of the world as they copy each other (Voltaire cited in Elmarsafy 2009: 101).

Not only does this quote contain another pejorative portrayal of the Ancient Hebrews, it also reveals the motivation behind Voltaire's rehabilitation of Islam and its comparison to Judaism. Voltaire tries to establish a new historiography which is universal and not dependent upon a literal reading of the Bible. Decentralizing Jewish history and portraying the Jews as 'Asiatics' are both part of this process (Elmarsafy 2009: 96; Sutcliffe 2003: 58). In his universal history Voltaire wants to make room for different civilizations such as those of the Arabs, the Indians, and the Chinese, which he admired most. His emphasis on the moral sophistication of non-Christian societies and the limitations of Biblical history is a direct attack on the foundations of revealed Christianity. 'Judaism represents that which Voltaire wishes to deny and destroy: the persistence and power of myth, and the rootedness of European Christian culture in the Judaic originary myth of the Bible' (Sutcliffe 2003: 240). Rather, Voltaire seeks to establish the Greeks and Romans as the true ancestors of the Europeans. He emphasizes that the spirit of the Arab people, more so than that of the Jews, resembled that of the ancient Romans (Elmarsafy 2009: 104).

These discussions of legalism, imposture, and the worldly ambitions of religious founders, circle a question which still dominates certain inquiries regarding religious freedom today, namely, how to separate religion and politics, or more specifically, how to draw a line between "religion and "religion-that-is-politics" (Weil 2011: 97). As I shall further discuss in chapter three, a focus on the essentially 'political nature' of Judaism and Islam often accompanied a willful blindness towards, or conversely an explicit defense of, Christianity's political and civil entanglements, and the subsequent privileges thereby accruing to Christians.

The topic of legalism is also connected to the next theme to be discussed in this chapter: the idea that Judaism is a fundamentally particularistic religion. The Jew's loyalty to their own rigid rule-system was used for explaining their isolation and to make the argument that Jews formed a nation within a nation. Even though Islam was at times also described as legalistic and the Qur'an as a book of laws, the religion was rarely considered particularistic. Islam's rapid spread and its successes in converting conquered peoples were sometimes admired but also inspired fear and condemnation. In both cases it helped establish an image of

Islam as a religion with universal aspirations. The trope of particularism was therefore reserved for describing Judaism.

### ***Particularism and intolerance***

What caused Jews to behave so ‘*abominable*’, according to many Enlightenment authors, was not just a randomly bestowed fanatical mindset, but also a covenant with Jehovah that ‘instructed them to love only themselves and hate all others’ (Nirenberg 2013: 335). The unique tie between the Hebrews and their God, and the alleged ‘election’ of the Jewish people, is often discussed both in relation to their intolerance and their separateness from other peoples. The idea that Judaism is essentially a particularistic religion was a further argument used against the Jews to explain their intolerance and possibly violent tendencies.

The binary opposition between the old covenant of the Jews and the Christian covenant that superseded it was central to the self-definition of early Christians and continued to play a role in Christian thought regarding its relation to Judaism. In theological polemics the old Mosaic covenant was established through a rigid law of the letter, while the new covenant of Christ was a spiritual covenant of love; it was also potentially universal, while the old covenant was exclusively revealed only to the Hebrews. While most Enlightenment authors did not make use of these exact theological arguments, they often referred to a notion of exclusiveness when discussing the position of Judaism in their societies. Diderot, for example, argues that the Jews’ continued existence could be partly explained by the exclusivity of their religion, which did not permit intermingling. They thus had to form ‘a nation apart’ (Diderot cited in Poliakov 1975: 110). Rousseau, who in his work shows less interest in the Jews than his contemporaries, makes a similar argument:

To prevent his people from melting away among foreign peoples, he [Moses] gave them customs and usages incompatible with those of the other nations; he overburdened them with peculiar rites and ceremonies; he inconvenienced them in a thousand ways in order to keep them constantly on the alert and to make them forever strangers among other men; and all the fraternal bonds with which he drew together the members of his republic were as many barriers keeping them separate from their neighbours and preventing them from mingling with them (Rousseau 1986/1772: 163-164).

While Rousseau admires both Moses as a lawgiver and the strength of Jewish institutions – ‘proof against time, fortune and conquerors, which five thousand years have not been able to destroy or even to alter’ (ibid: 163) – he paints a familiar image of the ‘Eternal Jew’ as unchangeable, legalistic, and never intermingling with non-Jews (Schechter 2003: 55).

Spinoza, a century earlier, had also defended the old covenant as having been appropriate or even indispensable for the founding of a stable polity, and argued that the peculiarity of the Hebrews' rules and ceremonies, and their strict attachment to them, was one of the main causes for the hatred other peoples felt for the Jews. Their rites, claims Spinoza, are not only different but 'contrary to the rites of other nations' (Spinoza 2007/1670: 55). The Jews' statelessness and dispersion can thus be attributed to the way they separated themselves from others 'also by the sign of circumcision which they zealously maintain' (ibid). The resentment other peoples felt towards the Hebrews served to preserve their identity as a group separate from all others.

The Hebrews in their turn, states Spinoza, loved their country but hated all other nations. Again, their different way of worshipping is invoked to explain this hatred. Their peculiar rites and ceremonies, which were directly opposed to those of others, caused their animosity towards other peoples to be nourished on a regular basis:

Thus the love of the Hebrews for their country was not simple love but piety, which along with hatred of other nations, was so nourished and inflamed by daily worship that it must have become second nature. For their daily worship was not only completely different (which made them altogether unique and utterly distinct from others) but absolutely contrary to that of other peoples. As a consequence of which these daily expressions of reproach were bound to generate a ceaseless hatred, and one more firmly entrenched in their minds than any other, given that such a detestation born of great devotion and piety, was itself viewed as pious, and no hatred is greater or more persistent than this type. Nor was the usual cause of hatred lacking either, that is, of course, reciprocal abhorrence becoming more and more inflamed, because other nations were bound to react by developing an extreme hatred for them (Spinoza 2007/1670: 223).

The hatred the Hebrews felt towards other peoples was permitted and devout, and their perception 'that all men are enemies' was constantly reinforced by their 'unique system of morals and worship' which was, according to Spinoza, in direct contradiction with the systems of others (ibid).

Where Spinoza makes a clear distinction between the ancient Hebrews living under Mosaic Law, and contemporary Jews – who are no longer bound by the old laws and have left many of them behind – Voltaire often keeps his readers guessing as to whether his accusations are directed towards the ancient Hebrews, contemporary Jews, or both. The idea that the Jews hated all other people was repeated obsessively by Voltaire. Similarly to Spinoza he argues that this hate is the result of their exclusive religion. The hatred stems from the

Hebrews' peculiar laws and customs 'which are exactly the opposite of all proper social customs' (Voltaire cited in Hertzberg 1968: 302). The Jews, says Voltaire, are therefore 'rightly treated as a people opposed to all others' (ibid); they despise all other nations and, in turn, are despised by everyone else. It is the inevitable result of their laws and customs: 'They either had to conquer everybody or be hated by the whole human race' (ibid). The God of the Hebrews repeatedly commanded them to kill all idolaters. In his *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763) Voltaire casts some doubt as to whether this is still their law: 'they look upon us as idolaters; and although we are tolerant towards them these days, they could easily, if they got the upper hand, denude the world of all but our marriageable daughters' (Voltaire 2000/1763: 79).

Islam was less often accused of particularism. Enlightenment thinkers often discussed the religious tolerance exhibited by the Ottomans. Voltaire claims that throughout its history Islam has become more tolerant while the tolerance of Christianity had waned. The successful and rapid spread of the Islamic religion, again compared to the failure of the Hebrews to establish a Jewish empire, was also attributed to the fact that they, unlike the Hebrews, admitted foreigners into their religion:

Why did Mahomet and his followers, who started their conquests in exactly the same way as the Jews, accomplish such great things, while the Jews accomplished such small ones? Might it not be because Muslims took the greatest care to subject the vanquished to their religion, sometimes through force and sometimes through persuasion? The Hebrews on the other hand, rarely allowed foreigners into their religion. The Arab Muslims incorporated the other nations; the Hebrews kept themselves separate. [...] They know neither hospitality, nor generosity, nor mercy. Their highest happiness is to practice usury with foreigners; and this sort of usury, which is the foundation of cowardice, is so deeply rooted in their hearts that it is continually used in the rhetorical figures of their native eloquence. Their glory consists in bleeding and burning the little villages they manage to conquer (Voltaire cited in Elmarsafy 2009: 103).

In the work of Baron Thierry D'Holbach – who is, as already noted, portrayed by Jonathan Israel as one of the radical Enlightenment's main figures – the notion that contemporary Jews, like their ancestors, feel an obstinate attachment to each other and despise all other peoples, is formulated in the most explicit manner:

As for real morals, Modern Jews are as completely unaware of them as the ancients. They are neither more honest nor more just to foreigners than were their ancestors. They still think that everything is permissible against infidels or heretics [...]. Jewish scholars have frankly said that if a Jew sees an infidel on the point of dying or drowning, he should not save him or pull him out of the water, although he is not allowed to kill him if he is not fighting against the Israelites [...] he is not allowed to treat a sick infidel, not even for money [...]. In general, the conduct of modern Jews indicates that, like their ancestors, they feel no obligation towards those who are not members of their holy nation. [...] [T]here is reason to believe that if they were stronger, they would on many occasions have revived the tragedies for which their country was formerly the continual theater [...] (D'Holbach cited in Poliakov 1975: 123).

The Jews, both ancient and contemporary, are thus presented as a people stuck in their rigid old covenant and therefore unwilling, or unable, to accept a universal morality.

The alleged particularism of the Jews, and the legalistic character of their faith, both played a role in developing the idea of the Jews as forming a nation within a nation. Ronald Schechter shows that throughout the French Enlightenment the Jews were always seen as a nation apart, described as *la nation Juive*. It was in the years leading up to the French Revolution that this became identified as a political problem requiring a political solution. This identification stemmed from the philosophy, Schechter posits, that an ideal polity consists of a single 'nation, with a single set of laws and values and a single will to which all other group loyalties, identities, customs, rules, and wills must yield. It proudly proclaims its ideal of indivisibility and denounces its anti-value of particularism' (2003: 32).

The identification of the 'Jewish Problem' led to heated discussions on the possibility of the assimilation of the Jews and the question of whether an extension of civil rights to Jewish compatriots would aid in their *regeneration*.<sup>26</sup> The problem was considered so urgent that in 1785 the Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts in Metz launched an essay contest on the question 'Is there a way of making the Jews more useful and happier in France?' (ibid: 82). One of the contributions to this contest makes clear the connection between the trope of particularism and the next problematic dimension of religion which rose to the fore of discussions concerning Judaism and Islam: namely their materialist, non-spiritual ways of worship. In his essay Monsieur Thiéry denounces the way Jews have been treated by Christians and passionately argues for their legal emancipation. However, their assimilation into society must be supervised and cannot be accomplished if they hold on to the external, material aspects of their faith. 'Let us begin', states Thiéry,

<sup>26</sup> The focus on the assimilation of the Jews in France did not stop once they were granted equal citizenship (Jansen 2013).

'by destroying all the humiliating signs that designate the Jews, so that their garb, their outward appearance, shows us that they are fellow citizens' (cited in Burns 1991: 11).

### ***Ritual and reward: materialist religion***

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, both Judaism and Islam were often deployed in arguments between Christian adversaries. Protestant 'paganopapists' compared Catholics to Jews and Muslims; Deist philosophers – and radical, atheist enlightenment authors such as d'Holbach – used comparisons with Islam and Judaism as a starting point for criticizing all revealed religion, including Christianity. The similarities that were advanced in these discussions often concerned ceremony and ritual. In an attempt to demonstrate their opponents' erroneous ways, it was emphasized that they had not yet overcome the pervading sensuality and materiality characteristic of Judaism and Islam. As discussed above, both faiths were often portrayed as political religions, their founders driven by material ambitions, or by an interest in state-building; in addition, authors referred to Jewish and Islamic preoccupations with the body and the material world, as manifested in their daily rites of worship.

### *Ceremonies*

In spreading the idea of Jewish materialism, Spinoza's work was again influential.<sup>27</sup> But while he did not condemn Moses' ambition to gain material welfare for his nation, nor proffer an outright rejection of Hebrew rites and ceremonies, many Enlightenment authors subsequently developing his arguments did so. According to Spinoza the only truth that could be found in Scripture was a universal morality, a truth that could also be found 'by light of reason'. Spinoza repeatedly claims that Moses did not teach this universal morality, whereas it could be found in the words of Christ. Discussing the Old Testament, he states:

Morality is not to be found there as moral teachings universal to all men, but only as instructions uniquely adjusted to the understanding and character of the Hebrew nation, and therefore relevant to the prosperity of their state alone (Spinoza 2007/1670: 69).

As discussed above, Spinoza argues that the ancient Hebrews, accustomed to slavery, could not have any sound – or spiritual – conception of God. This, according to Spinoza, is illustrated by the fact they transferred their worship to the golden calf. Moses could thus not teach his people obey God in any other way than by threatening punishment and promising rewards. 'For this reason

<sup>27</sup> Jewish materialism was not a new idea. Spinoza's influence lies in a secularization of the idea that was already prominent in early Christian discussions of Judaism (Nirenberg 2013: 58).

the right way of living or the true life and worship and love of God was more servitude to them than true liberty and the grace and gift of God' he claims (ibid: 38). The ceremonies and rites which formed a part of Mosaic Law were instituted on the same grounds: they 'served to establish and preserve the Jewish state' (ibid: 68). This early Christian supersessionist opposition between Jewish servitude and Christian freedom and morality is – as we will see in the next chapter – further systematized by Kant, who uses a comparison between Judaism and Christianity to develop his ideas on reason and autonomy.

Ceremonies, like other aspects of Hebrew law, are according to Spinoza 'not inscribed in the heart'. Therefore they are 'good only by convention and not by nature' (ibid: 70). Adherence to the divine and universal law promises true happiness, whereas the observance of rites and ceremonies leads only to 'security of the state, prosperity and worldly success' (ibid). Spinoza explains this by claiming that ceremonies and rites – and also symbols – constantly reminded the Hebrews of their obedience to the law:

This then was the purpose of ceremonies, that they [i.e. the people] should do nothing at their own discretion and everything at the command of another, and should confess by their every action and thought that they did not consist in their own right at all but were entirely subject to someone else (ibid: 75).

Even though Spinoza thus acknowledged that ceremonies and rites can be of use in specific contexts, his work also reveals a supposed connection between ritual or ceremony and fanaticism. Ceremonial or ritual aspects of religion attach believers firmly to their faith and inhibit 'sound reason let alone doubt' (ibid: 5). Spinoza uses Islam as an example of a religion that has been adept at using this strategy:

A great deal of effort has been devoted to adorning religion, whether true or false, with pomp and ceremony, so that everyone would find it more impressive than anything else and observe it zealously, with the highest degree of fidelity. The Turks [i.e., the Muslims] have organized this very effectively. Believing as they do that it is wicked even to argue about religion (ibid: 5).

In his discussion of the Jews' dispersion and statelessness, Spinoza argues that the resentment of others towards them has been an important reason for their preservation as a nation and their continued separateness from other peoples. However, in the same passage he also mentions the 'sign of circumcision' as something which 'has such great importance'; Spinoza is almost persuaded 'that this thing alone will preserve their nation for ever' (ibid: 55). Were it not for the

weakness of their religious principles, Spinoza claims, he would unreservedly believe that the Jews, given the opportunity, would re-establish their state. The significance of an external sign for differentiating oneself from others is further illustrated by the example of the Chinese ‘who likewise zealously retain a kind of topknot on their heads, by which they distinguish themselves from all other men and have preserved themselves in this distinctive manner for many thousands of years’ (ibid: 55-56).

An even more explicit connection between external worship, or the material aspects of religion, and a particularistic religious attachment, or even fanaticism, is made by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of Laws* (1989/1748). Admitting objects of a sensible nature into our rites of daily worship causes greater attachment, especially when ‘the externals of worship are very magnificent’ (Montesquieu 1989/1748: 481). Catholics therefore ‘are more invincibly attached to their religion than the Protestants are to theirs, and more zealous for its propagation’ (ibid: 480). Again, Judaism and Islam are depicted as having become obstinate and prejudiced religions because of the amount of rites and ceremonies they employ:

A religion burdened with many practices attaches people to it more strongly than another one that has fewer; one is attached to the things that continually occupy one: witness the tenacious obstinacy of the Mohammedans and the Jews, and the ease of changing religions for barbarian and savage peoples, who, wholly occupied with hunting or warring, scarcely burden themselves with religious practices (ibid: 480).

Even though people look down on idolatrous religions, Montesquieu argues, they are extremely addictive. This, he states, is due to our natural inclination for sensual objects.

#### *Greed and bodily pleasures*

Like Judaism, Islam was thus also associated with materialism and the senses. Looking back to Prideaux and Voltaire’s play we can see that Muhammad’s imposture is directly linked to his alleged lust for women and ambitions for political and material gain. These two dominant passions, says Prideaux, permeate the basic structure of the religion Muhammad founded: ‘There is scarcely a chapter of the Alcoran which, doth not lay down some law of war and bloodshed for the promoting of the one; or else give some liberty for the use of Women’ (Prideaux 1697: 138).

Similar to the presentation of Moses in the work of Spinoza, Muhammad is here portrayed as someone who convinces his people by threatening punishment

and promising reward. According to Prideaux, Muhammad's main argument for ensuring obedience of his people was his promise of paradise, which he cunningly adapted to suit the chief pleasures of the Arabs. Like Montesquieu, Prideaux believes the disposition of the Arabs can be explained by the fact that they inhabit a Torrid climatic zone:

They [...] were, through the nature of the clime, as well as the excessive corruption of their manners, exceeding given to the love of women; and the scorching heat and driness of the country making rivers of water, cooling drinks, shaded gardens, and pleasant fruits, mist refreshing and delightful unto them; they were from hence apt to place their highest enjoyment in things of this nature. And therefore, to answer the height of their carnal desires, he made the joys of heaven, which he proposed for a reward to all those that should believe in him, to consist totally in these particulars (Prideaux *ibid*: 25).

The sensuous nature of paradise portrayed in the Qur'an is often used to argue that Islam is a religion of bodily pleasures, and thus a form of external worship. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the publication of the *Arabian Nights*, a more general notion of the exotic, romantic, and sensual nature of the Arab had become firmly lodged in the European mind. And, according to many European authors, it was 'the profligate, polygamous prophet Muhammad who had influenced the sensual oriental mind' (Almond 2003: 422).

While in Voltaire's play Muhammad's lust for women and his desire for material and political gain all play a central role, the later Voltaire – whose view of Islam is, as I already discussed, considerably more positive – rejects the idea of Islam as a sensuous religion. He even goes as far as to chastise his contemporaries who do argue for this premise: 'I am telling you again, you ignorant imbeciles, whom other ignoramus have persuaded that the Mahomatan religion is sensuous and voluptuous, it is not true' (Voltaire cited in Elmarsafy 2009: 83). Voltaire uses the Islamic prohibition of alcohol and games, and the laws on fasting and charity, to show that Islam is a strict religion that demands restraint from its believers. He also puts forward the claim that Muhammad had reduced the number of wives a man could have to four, where the number had been previously unlimited. Solomon, he states, had eight hundred wives and David had eighteen, so it was the Jewish religion that was lax. As does Montesquieu, Voltaire uses the theory of climate to explain Muslim customs and the religion's historical development. Islamic polygamy, for example, is further defended by the claim that in warm climates women 'cease being beautiful and fertile early' (*ibid*: 87).

Like the Muslims, Jews were associated with greed and sometimes also with sexual perversity. A portrayal of Jews as sexually perverse is also to be found in the work of Voltaire. Poliakov shows that Voltaire's imagination was 'mainly stirred by the male sexual organ' (1975: 87). In his *Dictionnaire* Voltaire claims that Abraham was forced to introduce circumcision to hinder the masturbation rampant among the Jews. He also argues that the Jews were most likely prone to bestiality, as their law was the only one containing a specific prohibition of this practice (Sutcliffe 2003: 237-238).

During the Enlightenment the figure of the Jew continued to play a central role in discussions concerning commerce, mercantilism, and the money economy. The expansion of the stock exchange, banking, and broking were often described as 'thoroughly Jewish' (Nirenberg 2013: 345). While the story of the golden calf was still regularly employed to argue that the Jews were idolatrous worshippers of the material world, many philosophers acknowledged that persecution had forced the Jews into the credit market. Even so, traditional images connecting Jews to usury, greed, and materialism remained dominant. Montesquieu, for example, argued that the Jews had become usurers under compulsion, and would thus most likely improve themselves if they were treated better. However, his *Persian Letters* present a disturbingly uniform image of the Jews, who, according to the Muslim traveler in the book, resemble each other all over the globe and pursue the same goals: 'You can be sure whenever there is money, there are Jews' (Montesquieu cited in Nirenberg 2003: 351-352).

There is a connection between these representations of Jews as cogs in the money economy and their alleged unphilosophical mentality and lack of creativity. 'Physiocrats' saw the expanding money economy as something that was thoroughly 'sterile', trade as not producing anything, and all wealth deriving from agricultural production (Nirenberg 2013: 346). The mind of the Jew was in turn also portrayed as sterile; Voltaire implored the Jews to become 'thinking creatures', for in his opinion they had only been 'calculating creatures' (Voltaire cited in Sutcliffe 2000: 33).<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically the Jews, who were so often seen as an archaic remnant stuck in an obsolete religion, were thus also used as symbols of development and cosmopolitanism. Their role in the money economy and their diasporic scattering over the world inevitably connected them to modernity. In these Enlightenment discussions one can thus find many building blocks of a distinctly modern anti-Semitism in which the connection between Judaism, capital and its influence has remained central.

<sup>28</sup> This idea of the Jews as sterile, uncreative, producing nothing, can be traced further back to the theological notion that the Jews, after the

coming of Christ, had become a relic/ hollow shell and were only preserved as historical witnesses of Christian truth.

### Conclusion

I have argued in the preceding sections that a focus on Judaism and Islam in Enlightenment thought brings to light different aspects of religion that were considered problematic, or even dangerous. These characteristics were intimately intertwined. Connections are made between legalism and fanaticism, and between particularism and religious signs and ceremonies. These Enlightenment constructions of Judaism and Islam provide insights into both the ideational development of modern notions of 'religion', and the accompanying range of thought on its problematic characteristics. In the way these characteristics are projected onto Judaism and Islam, certain theological tropes and prejudices that were able to survive more or less intact become visible.

In this projection of religion's problems onto Judaism and Islam one can further see an attempt to imagine a Europe free from such problems. The way in which Judaism and Islam, Jews and Muslims feature in the work of eighteenth-century scholars also sheds light on the endeavor of demarcating a European civilization that is no longer connected to the Near East, even though the interconnected roots of the three Abrahamic religions can be found there. Freeing Europe from these historical foundations was an aim of both D'Holbach and Voltaire. In the next chapter I will show that Immanuel Kant mounts a similar attack on Christianity's Jewish roots, and further develops ideas on Christian Europe's place in ethno-religious hierarchies.

# Chapter 2

## **Kant's Universal Religion. Europe, Orient and the Limits of Reason**

Having discussed a broad range of Enlightenment thinkers in the first chapter I will now focus on the work of one in particular, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). His work deserves a special emphasis for two reasons. Firstly, Kant's influence on the development of a modern notion of religion is widely recognized. In his influential *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Talal Asad attributes to Kant a central role in the 'emergence of religion as a modern historical object' (1993: 1), claiming he contributed to the historical development of the idea of religion as an interior belief or mental state. Kant's universal definition of religion, 'abstracted from concrete practices' came to be used for comparing higher and lower religions, a comparison in which Protestant Christianity comes out as the religion conforming most closely to the Kantian moral ideal (ibid: 42). Kant can therefore be seen as 'a crucial intellectual connection between Protestant Christianity and modern philosophy and secularism' (Jansen 2017: 379).<sup>29</sup> Secondly, like many scholars before him, Kant discusses fanaticism, legalism, materialism, and particularism in relation to both Islam and Judaism. However, in Kant's work these topics, (introduced in the previous chapter), are taken up in a way that integrates them into a broader philosophical framework. The discussions of Judaism and Islam serve to function in a system of thought which seeks to establish the interrelations between religion, reason, morality, and autonomy. As this Kantian

<sup>29</sup> For other discussions of Kant's role in the development of modern notions of religion see for example Danchin (2015: 242). For a more specific

reading of the influence of Kant's views of universal religion in the development of French ideology of laicism see Jansen (2013).

framework is still of significant influence within contemporary political theory, it is worthwhile examining the way in which his system of thought relies on a (hierarchical) ordering of religious – as well as cultural and racial – differences.<sup>30</sup>

Kant's taxonomies of non-European peoples and races have received relatively little attention in comparison with the pervasive influence of other aspects of his critical philosophy. The 'bemused indifference' (Frierson 2011: xxvii) with which his derogatory classifications of non-European and non-white peoples are often regarded occasionally stems from the mistaken view that his work on race predates the transformative critical-philosophical project through which he developed a genuinely morally universalist position (Kleingeld 2007). Others argue that while Kant's views on non-European people do indeed speak from prejudice, these views are not central to his philosophy.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore possible, they believe, to sanitize Kant's thought by dissecting its 'faulty anthropology' (Vial 2016: 36-37). One can thereby 'save' Kant's moral universalism and its vision of cosmopolitan peace. I will argue that Kant's views of Judaism and Islam, and his ideas about non-European peoples, do perform a clear function in his philosophical framework and cannot therefore be simply dissected or dismissed as common prejudice.

Judaism takes on a particularly important role in Kant's work, as his own idealized notion of a pure and moral religion is developed in direct opposition to it.<sup>32</sup> In the first part of this chapter I shall introduce those ideas of Kant's on Jewish legalism, materialism, and particularism which are central to the way in which this opposition is thought through. Unlike many of the authors discussed in the first chapter, Kant was in direct contact with Jewish scholars and students. I will briefly introduce his exchange with Moses Mendelssohn as it played an important role in the development of the argument Kant put forward in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1996a/1793). Islam plays a relatively minor role in Kant's work and is mentioned only sporadically in his anthropological writings and lectures; in the second section I discuss the way Kant relates Islam to fanaticism and enthusiasm. In his work on Judaism and Islam we see a manifestation of two types of anxiety regarding religion, namely that it can both inspire

<sup>30</sup> John Rawls is one of the main figures through which the Kantian framework regained prominence in the last decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview and categorizations of the ways different Kant interlocutors think about the implications his views on race have for his philosophy see Mills 2005.

<sup>32</sup> This aspect of his thought has received little attention even from those philosophers with a particular interest in Kant's views on religion. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on Kant's philosophy of religion is illustrative here; it provides an overview of Kant's writings on the topic and an extensive discussion of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, but does not contain a single mention of Judaism or the Jews (Pasternack and Fugate 2020).

complete subjection as well as generate an uncontrolled energy, making it into a potentially revolutionary force. In both cases religion is considered to be an obstacle to the proper functioning of human reason.

The assertion of a connection between Islam and fanaticism became increasingly dominant in nineteenth-century orientalist writings which explicitly brought together Judaism and Islam in the figure of the Semite. In the last part of the chapter I will explore the ways in which Kant's work foreshadows these later developments. In doing so I will bring together two aspects of his work that are often discussed separately, namely his thoughts on questions of true religion and those on national and racial characteristics. By discussing the position of Judaism and Islam in Kant's conceptual construction of the Orient I will question Christine Battersby's observation that the Kantian Orient was an ethnic and racial construct in which religion did not play a role (2007: 73); I will argue, rather, that it is within the Kantian opposition of Europe and the Orient that the complex entanglement between religious, ethnic, and racial categories is most visible. The way in which Kant contrasts Orient and Occident shows his interiorized definition of religion was developed as part of a broader vision establishing Europe as the privileged realm of reason, freedom, and morality.

### **Judaism and the Pure Religion of Morality**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Judaism, and also Islam, were often presented as religions that were legalistic, preoccupied with material gain, and devoted to ceremonies and objects of a sensuous nature. The hierarchical distinctions present in these characterizations – between the external law and internal morality, spiritual faith and ritual performance – are central to the thought of Immanuel Kant. As with those before him, he discusses these dichotomies 'by pouring concepts associated with the law and the material world in Jewish vessels' (Nirenberg 2013: 293).

The question of reason's independence from material consideration lies at the very heart of Kant's critique of both empiricism and traditional metaphysics. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1999/1781) he aims to prove that we cannot have knowledge of *things-in-themselves*, nor do we have access to a supernatural sign-system that allocates meaning to the world. This limit on the 'ability to perceive the empirical world and ascertain the existence of the supernatural instead enthroned "reason itself"' as the source of the laws of nature (Mack 2003: 25). Knowledge, argues Kant, is produced by the human mind containing *a priori* forms of understanding which structure our cognition of the sensible world. This notion of the primacy of human reason is extended to his moral and political

philosophy. If morality is to be compatible with freedom it would have to be entirely the product of human reason. Kant thus famously sketches an image of a human being who autonomously prescribes to himself the moral law. According to Kant, moral principles are produced by reason and are unconnected to empirical conditions: 'the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure Reason' (Kant 1998/1785: 3).

Throughout Kant's work Judaism and Jewish ways of life are presented as *unable* to overcome empirical conditions. This becomes especially visible when Kant tries to reconcile Christianity with his philosophical system. In his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1996a/1793) he tries to establish a compatibility between different aspects of the Christian faith and his conception of universal morality. Judaism in this work is continually employed as a negative image. As I will show, Islam also makes a brief appearance in this work, as its rituals are opposed to those of Christianity. Judaism, however, more consistently serves as Christianity's 'Other', an 'Other' that is eventually pushed out of the realm of religion altogether.

### ***Politics, law and rituals: worldly considerations***

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1996a/1793) Immanuel Kant distinguishes between 'ecclesiastical faith' and 'religion'. Most men, states Kant, do not grasp the true meaning of religion:

The ordinary human being will every time understand by it his own ecclesiastical faith, which is the one that falls within the grasp of his senses, whereas religion hides inside him and depends on moral dispositions. We do most people too much honor when we say of them that they profess this or that religion, for they know none and demand none; statutory ecclesiastical faith is all that they understand by the word (1996a/1793: 141).

What Kant calls 'religion' thus coincides with the moral principles that can be derived from human reason. Acting from these principles, he claims, is what makes us 'well-pleasing to God' (ibid: 147). What Kant calls 'ecclesiastical' or 'historical faith' may contain this rational core but acts mainly as a 'vehicle' or 'mystical cover' (ibid: 140). Different faiths contain doctrines, ceremonies and symbols that Kant describes as 'arbitrary' and 'contingent'. He does not claim, however, that we can do without ecclesiastical faith; even though he hopes that religion 'will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of determination' (ibid: 151), historical faith has a role in edifying ordinary believers, for whom grappling with abstract moral principles alone might still prove too difficult:

[B]ecause of the natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that the *senses can hold on to*, some confirmation from experience or the like, (a need which must also be seriously taken into account when the intention is to introduce a faith universally) some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used (ibid: 142).

Kant emphasizes that one should not confuse the different elements of historical faith with ‘means of grace’. Neither ceremony, nor the belief in doctrines, nor obedience to a revealed law, will lead to salvation. Echoing Spinoza’s view discussed in the previous chapter, Kant claims it is the ‘*moral* legislation, through which God’s will is originally engraved in our hearts’ (ibid: 138), which constitutes true religion, and – again as does Spinoza – invokes Judaism as a quintessential example of a doctrine that does not meet this ideal.

‘The Jewish faith’, Kant argues, was established as ‘a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state’ (ibid: 154); any ‘moral additions’ which might have been appended to it were not part of ‘Judaism as such’ (ibid). Kant therefore comes to the radical conclusion that Judaism should be altogether excluded from the realm of the ‘religious’:

Strictly speaking Judaism is not a religion at all but simply the union of a number of individuals who, since they belonged to a particular stock, established themselves into a community under purely political laws, hence not into a church (ibid).

While Kant claims that statutory law, or revealed religious law – as an element of historical faith – can sometimes be a means to propagate the eternal moral law found through human reason, the Ten Commandments, which make up the Mosaic Law, evidently do not fulfill this role. For the commandments ‘deal only with external actions’ and ‘are given with no claim at all on the moral disposition in following them’ (ibid: 155). Kant – again following Spinoza – opposes Judaism to Christianity in which the moral reasons for following obligations *were* emphasized. The Jews’ obedience to the law, however, was fostered by distributing rewards and punishments in this world. The Jews therefore acted *heteronomously*, they obeyed a law that was external to them to gain worldly rewards:

In this government the subjects remained attuned in their minds to no other incentive except the goods of this world and only wished, therefore, to be ruled through rewards and punishments in this life - nor were they in this respect capable of other laws except such as were in part imposed by burdensome ceremonies and observances (ibid: 119).

In the theocracy which was the Jewish state, God's name might have been honored, but 'only as a secular regent with absolutely no rights over, or claims upon, conscience' (ibid: 154-155).

Any act of religion that is not undertaken in a 'purely moral spirit but as a means' to appease God and 'through him, of satisfying all your wishes' should be considered a '*fetish-faith*' (ibid: 209). The 'sensuous human being', argues Kant, will often search for a means to circumvent the stringent conditions of moral motivation. In every type of historical faith people have devised certain practices for themselves, as *means of grace*' (ibid), believing that through this 'escape route' they will only have to observe 'the custom (the formalities)' and 'God will surely accept that for the act itself' (ibid).

Kant discusses Christian ceremonies and rituals – praying, churchgoing, baptism and communion – and argues that these can have the purpose of fostering moral dispositions, edifying individual believers and creating a moral community. However, if one conceives of these rituals as a direct service of God, and hence as a means of grace, they are what Kant calls a 'fetish-making' or a 'superstitious delusion' (ibid: 210). Rituals and ceremonies should not be seen as anything more than 'mere sensuous representations of the *universality* of religion' (ibid: 213).

It is in this context that Kant also discusses Islamic ritual; however, its possible value is dismissed without further ado. The comparison between Christian and Islamic rituals complicates the dominant interpretation of Kant as someone who propagated a purely internalized form of religion. For Kant, religious practices can play a positive role, but only as long as they bring forth the right moral dispositions. The discussion of Islamic practice also illustrates that even though *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* is critical of various (ritualistic) aspects of Christianity, its superiority as a historical faith is assumed throughout the work:

For instance, of the five great commands of the Mohammedan faith – washing, praying, fasting, almsgiving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca – alms giving alone would deserve to be excepted, if it occurred from a truly virtuous and at the same time religious disposition to human duty, and would thus also truly deserve to be regarded as a means of grace; but in fact, since in this faith almsgiving (*sic*) can well coexist with the extortion from others of things which are offered to God in the person of the poor, it does not deserve to be thus exempted (ibid: 209).

It remains unclear why Islamic prayer and pilgrimage to Mecca are not even considered as rituals that could have a morally edifying function, in the same way as certain Christian rites do. Only almsgiving is conceived as a practice that could potentially be worthy, assuming it had stemmed from universal moral duty.

Elsewhere, in other works, Kant connects Islam to materialism or to the worldly. For instance, in his writings on Islam, Arabs, and the Orient, he seems to reiterate the prevailing view of his time linking Islam to sensuality in his remarks on both the sensuous nature of the Qur'anic Paradise and the practice of Harems (Almond 2010: 34). However, the greater part of Kant's scarce discussions of Islam is concerned with the topics of fanaticism and enthusiasm, which I will return to in the second part of this chapter.

Kant's discussion of Judaism contains many familiar characterizations. However, within Kantian thought, Jewish materialism and legalism, and the political nature of Judaism, are not used merely to establish a religious hierarchy in which Christianity dominates; rather, the Jews' inability to 'overcome empirical conditions', their submission to a revealed law and need for external motivation, resolutely places them outside the realm of reason, freedom, and morality. The Jews are described as thoroughly *heteronomous*, and thus serve to mirror Kant's rational human being who 'belongs as a *member* to the kingdom of ends' (Kant 1998/1785: 41) and is only subject to the laws he legislates through his own free will. This exclusion, I will show in the following section, becomes more pronounced when Kant tries to establish the universal nature of Christianity by opposing it to Jewish particularism. Here I will also discuss how Judaism's incompatibility with reason is challenged by Moses Mendelssohn in his sharp critique of Kant's ideas on universal religion.

### ***Particularism and Christian universalism***

Throughout *Religion* Kant emphasizes the universality of the pure moral religion which every man can find for himself through the autonomous use of human reason. However, he states that every ecclesiastical faith sacrifices this universality by basing faith on revelation:

Historical faith (which is based upon revelation as experience) has only particular validity, namely for those in contact with the history on which the faith rests, and, like all cognition based on experience, carries with it the consciousness not that the object believed in *must* be so and not otherwise but only that it *is* so; hence it carries at the same time the consciousness of its contingency (Kant 1996a/1793: 146).

While Judaism is continually used as an example of a historical faith, Christianity is portrayed as a faith that by its very nature may have the ability to overcome the world of experience and contingency. Kant does so by trying to harmonize 'the essence of Christianity with the rational' by emphasizing 'one element of Christian doctrine that describes the Christ-like dying away from the worldly' (Mack 2003: 28). The dying of Christ, for Kant, constitutes detachment from

material and historical circumstance and thereby connects Christianity to his ideal of freedom as autonomy.

The Jews' attachment to a revealed Mosaic Law, and to the rewards of this world, by definition makes their faith particularistic, for only moral religion can be truly universal. The old covenant of the Jews, however, is described as *especially* exclusionary, reminding us of Voltaire's description of the Jews as 'a people opposed to all others'. Judaism, states Kant, 'excluded the whole human race from its communion, a people especially chosen by Jehovah for himself, hostile to all other peoples and hence treated with hostility by all of them' (Kant 1996a/1793: 155).<sup>33</sup> As a people it 'was to cut itself off from all other peoples and avoid intermingling with them by means of every conceivable – and in some cases painful – observance' (ibid: 201).<sup>34</sup> In Kant's anthropological work this idea of exclusivity and particularity is also used to characterize contemporary Jews living in Europe, whom he describes as 'a nation of nothing but merchants', outwitting and cheating 'the people under whom they find protection' and using no other moral principle than "“buyer beware” [...] in dealing with us' (Kant 2006: 100). The Jews thus remain a nation apart whose presence in Europe benefits no one but themselves.

The idea of the Jews' immutable ties to Jehovah, which later became an important topic in the anti-Semitic writings of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, is in complete contrast to the *new* covenant of Christ. Even if Christianity as an ecclesiastical faith contains elements that are arbitrary and contingent, Kant argues that it is the Christian church 'which from the beginning bore within it the germ and the principles of the objective unity of the true and *universal* religious faith to which it is gradually being brought nearer' (Kant 1996a/1793: 154). This germ of universality can be found in the figure of Christ, whom 'Kant did not hesitate to present as a Kantian rebel against Jewish Materialism' (Nirenberg 2013: 394). Christianity, he argued, 'has the great advantage over Judaism of being represented as coming *from the mouth of the first teacher* not as a statutory but as a moral religion' (Kant 1996a/1793: 187). Kant denies the divinity of Christ and instead presents him as a person who wanted to bring about 'a public revolution (in religion), by overthrowing a morally repressive ceremonial faith and the authority of its priests' (ibid: 120). The importance of the figure of Jesus lies in his embodiment of a certain moral ideal which could inspire believers; as an

<sup>33</sup> In *The Conflict of the Faculties* written four years after *Religion* Kant adds that not only Jews, but also Hindus and Muslims 'refuse to recognize as a law anything that differs from theirs, and give other peoples, who do not have exactly the ecclesiastical rites as theirs, the title of [...] infidels' (Kant 1996b/ 1798: 273n).

<sup>34</sup> Kant here is presumably referring to circumcision.

‘example for everyone to follow’ (ibid). His death says Kant ‘most strikingly displays the contrast between the freedom of the children of heaven and the bondage of a mere son of earth’ (ibid: 121).

Kant’s description of Christ as someone who ‘opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality [...] while he abandons to their fate all those who prefer moral servitude’ (ibid) shows that he proposes a radical break between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism as an historical faith might have furnished the occasion for the moral revolution of Christ; Christianity, however, did not *arise from* Judaism, but from an ‘entirely new principle’ (ibid: 156). Kant introduces the philosophy of the Greeks and their ‘moral doctrines of freedom’, which had already unsettled the slavish minds of the Jews, to explain why they might have been ripe for this revolution (Meld Shell 2007:117). Yet he emphasizes that the revolt should be conceived as ‘as a total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated’ (Kant 1996a/1793: 156). Like Voltaire, Kant thus tries to destabilize the idea that European Christianity was rooted in Judaism. Both authors emphasize the importance of Greek and Roman thought for decentralizing Judaism’s historical role. In the final section of the chapter I will come back to this separation of Europe from what Kant construes as ‘the Orient’.

### ***Jewish conversion***

In spite of Kant’s derogatory representation of the Jewish faith, he believed it was possible that at some point the Jews would leave behind their ‘ancient cult’ (ibid: 275). ‘We can consider it possible’, he states, ‘even in their case if, as is now happening, purified religious concepts awaken among them’ (ibid). The Christian church, argues Kant, is the church equipped to lead them: ‘For they long had *garments without a man* in them (a church without religion) and since, moreover, a *man without garments* (religion without a church) is not well protected’ (ibid). The Jews in this case would have to leave behind all ancient statutory teachings but ‘would have to be left free, in their interpretation of the Scriptures (the Torah and the Gospels), to distinguish the way in which Jesus spoke as a Jew to Jews from the way he spoke as a moral teacher to human beings in general’ (ibid: 276). This would ‘leave the Jews a distinctive faith and yet quickly call attention to them as an educated and civilized people who are ready for all the rights of citizenship and whose faith could also be sanctioned by the government’ (ibid: 275), at least until the division of sects would make way for one true religion. The coming of this pure moral religion is what Kant infamously describes as ‘the euthanasia of Judaism’ (ibid). While Kant *did* argue for the emancipation of the Jews, he believed they would be ‘ready’ for citizenship rights only when they renounced their faith.

The 'leaving behind' of the Jews' attachment to the celebratory Law of Moses was one of the main topics of debate between Kant and his Jewish contemporaries and played a central role in the exchange he conducted with the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). Susan Meld Shell argues that *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) can be read partly as a response to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem. Or on Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), while *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) is a response to Mendelssohn's death (Shell 2007: 104). While Kant argues that the Jews can only become moral and autonomous if they leave behind their statutory teachings, in *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn maintains that there is no conflict between philosophical rationality and the Jewish observance of the ceremonial law. Furthermore, Mendelssohn explicitly rejects the Kantian idea of a universal ideal of religion that everyone should adhere to.

One purpose of the Jewish law, Mendelssohn claims, is to facilitate morally informed critical enquiry. It 'shores up' moral knowledge accessible to rational inquiry and 'sound common sense' alike. This is how Judaism differs from Christianity:

Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine *legislation* – laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to gain temporal and eternal felicity (Mendelssohn 1983/1781: 89-90).

The Jewish religion, argues Mendelssohn, does not contain a supernatural revelation of religion in the form of creedal doctrines indispensable for salvation. Instead, its instructions and commandments, when followed, help Jews come to understand the eternal truths which are available to all men.

Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic Law, there is not a single one which says: *You shall believe or not believe*. They all say: *you should do or not do*. Faith is not commanded, for it accepts no other commands than those that come to it by way of conviction (ibid: 100).

Mendelssohn also argues that, since the destruction of the Temple, Mosaic Law is binding only in conscience; there is therefore no reason Jewish observance should inhibit the Jews' participation in civil society. Each Jewish individual can decide for himself if observance makes him a better person, Mendelssohn contends, which leads to the further claim that the Jews should give up their traditional 'autonomy' as a community and leave behind, for example, their right to excommunication of religious dissidents (see Altmann introduction in Mendelssohn 1983/1781: 5).

Mendelssohn elaborates on the distinction between *doing* and *believing* when he underlines the importance of the Hebrew oral tradition. He does stress

the importance of the written word for his enlightened contemporaries, who even express their ‘love and anger in letters’ (Mendelssohn 1983/ 1781: 103), but he claims that putting convictions, ideas, and religious doctrines into writing also has its shortcomings. While written words always remain the same – ‘rigid forms into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them’ – the ancient Hebrews were ‘entrusted to living, spiritual instruction which can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances’ (ibid: 102). The Ceremonial law, claims Mendelssohn, is a ‘living script, rousing mind and heart’ which provides the opportunity for oral instruction. This not only makes it more flexible, but also connects religion and moral teachings directly to men’s daily activities. A religion placing too much emphasis on the written word, he argues, ‘creates a too wide division between doctrine and life’ (ibid: 118). Moreover, the actions and practices prescribed by the ceremonial law also have another advantage over alphabetical signs:

‘[O]f not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature, poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral written instruction. [...] In everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as in private dwellings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes and ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting, occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, [...] to enquire after the spirit and purpose of those doings and to seek the instruction which his master considered him capable of absorbing and prepared to receive. Thus teaching and life, wisdom and activity, speculation and sociability were most intimately connected (Mendelssohn 1983/1781: 119-120).

In Mendelssohn’s defense of the Mosaic Law we can thus already find a critique of an *interior* notion of religion focused only on the importance of *belief* in certain doctrines. Mendelssohn’s claim that faith is not only represented but *constituted* by religious practices is echoed in contemporary critiques of a modern concept of religion. *Jerusalem* also contains a critical appraisal of a *privatized* idea of religion as an individual, non-communal and non-societal enterprise. Outside of society, states Mendelssohn, men cannot naturally perform their duties towards other men, and it is a mistake to think that they *could* perform their duties toward God (ibid: 40). These critiques of Kant’s conceptualization of ‘religion’ are related to a more fundamental criticism of the Kantian moral framework in which universal and absolute moral principles can be derived at by transcending the contingencies of historical context. Mendelssohn emphasizes that moral action stem from the constant reinterpretation of the ceremonial law. Thus, contrary to Kant, he argues that the moral principles that should guide our actions cannot be formulated once and for all, but only when they take into account ‘changes of time and circumstances’ (ibid: 102). Mendelssohn

here therefore explicitly opposes the 'Kantian fusion of epistemology and morality' (Mack 2003: 79) and opens up the possibility of morality coinciding with 'various ways of perceiving the world, be they autonomous or heteronomous' (ibid: 86).

Ironically, many of Mendelssohn's contemporaries failed to recognize his ardent pleas for pluralism. *Jerusalem* was in fact partly written in response to both critics and admirers who argued that Mendelssohn's 'enlightened' ideas on the topics of religion, morality, and freedom of conscience could be read as a sign that he had left the religion of his fathers behind. 'Perhaps', one of his critics addressed him 'you have now come closer to the faith of the Christians, having torn yourself from the servitude of iron churchly bonds, and having commenced teaching the liberal system of a more rational worship of God, which constitutes the true character of Christian religion' (Mendelssohn 1983/1781: 86).

Mendelssohn answers these calls for Jewish conversion by emphasizing the Jewish foundations of Christianity:

If it's true that the cornerstones of my house are dislodged and the structure threatens to collapse, would it be wise for me to remove my belongings from the ground floor to the top floor for safety? Am I more secure there? As you know, Christianity is built upon Judaism, and if that falls Christianity has to collapse with it in one heap of ruins (ibid: 87).

In *Religion*, a work in which the thesis about the Jewish roots of Christianity is radically rejected, Kant interprets Mendelssohn's words in a very different way. Referring to the above passage regarding the two floors, Kant states:

His true opinion, however, shines through fairly clearly. He means: If you yourselves first clear Judaism out of your *religion* (in the historical doctrine of faith it may nonetheless remain as an antiquity), then we will be able to take your proposal under deliberation. [...] Our burden is not lightened in the least by casting off the yoke of external observances if another is imposed on us in its stead (Kant 1996a/1793: 187).

The idea that the problematic characteristics of Christianity – a religion that is by itself pure and moral – can be accounted for by pointing to 'Jewish influences' is made even more explicit when Kant discusses the Jews as Orientals, as I shall explore further on.

Jews will not want to convert to Christianity, Kant has Mendelssohn argue, as long as Christianity is still so thoroughly Jewish. Reading *Jerusalem* however, Mendelssohn's defense of religious pluralism is unmistakable. Emphasizing the inadequacy of our system of language, concepts, signs and symbols, and the difficulties in communicating our own convictions to another human being, Mendelssohn

claims that agreement on matters of faith is impossible to establish. The conviction that there will at some point be *one shepherd and one flock*, he argues, is therefore a dangerous one. Talking about a union of faith ‘feigns brotherly love, effuses human tolerance’ but will, in the end, be an obstacle to freedom of conscience:

Brothers, if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of providence. None of us thinks and feels exactly like our fellow man. [...] Why should we make ourselves unrecognizable to each other in the most important concerns of our life by masquerading, since God stamped everyone, not without reason, with his own facial features (Mendelssohn 1983/1781:138).

More than two hundred years before Talal Asad critiqued the hierarchical implications of Kant’s ‘universal’ idea of religion Mendelssohn had already established that “‘religion” is not a neutral concept with which to understand the ‘religions’ of other peoples’ (Jansen 2013: 218). It is important to recognize that this critical perspective, and the plea for the acceptance of genuine pluralism that accompanies it, are part of the European Enlightenment tradition. As Jansen argues: ‘Failing to acknowledge this leads to a monolithic presentation of options that have been available in Europe, and that have been tragically unequal in competing for the meaning of the Enlightenment’ (Jansen 2013: 218).<sup>35</sup>

Mendelssohn resists the idea that an abandonment of the ceremonial, empirical, and everyday aspects of religion is a necessity for reason and in doing so questions therefore whether the transcendence of worldly circumstance is a necessity for moral action. Kant, however, holds on to the idea that moral self-legislation can only be achieved by a radical break with these materialist particulars. Judaism, in his work, is continually described as a religion that is thoroughly submitted to the worldly and therefore as being incompatible with reason, morality, and autonomy. Kant’s work shows the persistence of supersessionist thinking. Theological binaries – letter-spirit, law-morality, subjection-freedom – return in strength in Kant’s account of Christ as a teacher who introduces people to moral religion and helps them overcome moral servitude. However, his supersessionist narrative gains extra force as it is paralleled by a (secular) philosophical narrative which connects reason and autonomy to the overcoming of empirical restrictions. The Jews in Kant’s thought become a philosophical enemy as well as a theological one.

<sup>35</sup> The debate between Kant and Mendelssohn also reveals the irony of the fact that Kant and his Protestant-secular views are seen as an unambiguous part ‘The’ Enlightenment, while Mendelssohn -

when discussed at all - is often placed under the special heading of ‘religious Enlightenment’ (see for example Sorkin 2008).

As we will see at the end of this chapter, the Jews' subjection to the sensual world makes them exemplary Orientals, for Oriental peoples are characterized by Kant as being immersed in the sensuous. Before discussing Kant's descriptions of the Orient, however, I will look at his miscellaneous writings on Islam. While Kant at times does associate Islam with the sensuous, the religion is more often associated with a different impediment to reason, *fanaticism*, but mostly with the more positively assessed characteristic of *enthusiasm*.

### ***Enthusiasm, Fanaticism and the 'Islamic Mind'***

In the previous chapter we saw how Judaism and Islam were not only described as political, legalistic and ceremonial, but also as fanatical or *zealous*. The accusations levelled against them of being cunning and geared towards material and political gain, as well as being blessed with an inflamed imagination and a pathological passion seem at odds with each other. However, both the submission to an external law or motivation through external rewards, as well as a predisposition of fanaticism – interpreted as a disease of the mind – can be interpreted as inhibitions of rational or autonomous choice and action.

The concept of 'fanaticism' was used by Deleyre and Voltaire to indict a wide range of the irrational, intolerant, and violent behavior and thinking of religious believers. Voltaire's work in particular has contributed to the lasting image of the religious fanatic as the sworn enemy of the Enlightenment and its values of tolerance and rationality.<sup>36</sup> To understand Kant's use of fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) and its sister concept enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*), it is necessary to complicate this 'simple trope of fanaticism as anti-Enlightenment, and Enlightenment as anti-fanaticism' (Toscano 2010: 109). Before turning to Kant's discussion of the concepts and their application to Islam, I will therefore briefly probe their complex and muddled histories.

In *Fanaticism. On the Uses of an Idea* (2010) Alberto Toscano argues that fanaticism has always been a highly polemical concept. Locating the emergence of the discourse on fanaticism to the time of the German peasant wars of the sixteenth century, tracing its use throughout the Enlightenment, and discussing its application in polemics against the French revolutionaries, Toscano shows how the term was employed to describe

<sup>36</sup> Even though Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* defines fanaticism as 'the effect of a false conscience, which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions' (Voltaire 1901/1764) it also discusses non-religious forms of fanaticism. As does Deleyre he introduces the fanaticism of imperial conquest and deems fanatical

those legislators 'extending their regulations beyond the limits within which alone they were intended to operate. [...] When extended by zeal to a whole people, and transferred by ambition from one climate to another, some changes of institution should take place, some accommodation to persons, places, and circumstances' (ibid).

those who were deemed a threat to the ‘orderly reproduction of society’ (2010: 45). Both in Luther’s fierce condemnations of the Anabaptist rebellions and in Burke’s anti-revolutionary treatises, fanaticism was used to describe individuals and groups who wanted to bring about a radical change in the ecclesiastical and political order. Toscano thereby destabilizes the notion of *religion* as the privileged site of fanaticism. The term was used to discredit various claims and did so by *pathologizing* them: ‘fanaticism is often identified as a ‘mad’ request for social equality’ (Toscano 2006). The etymology of the German term *Schwärmerei* – most regularly translated as fanaticism – also reveals a direct link to the theme of anxiety for the masses as a *swarm*, ‘a multitude in revolt’ (ibid). This same notion of the fanatic as an enemy of the social order is put forward by Charles Taylor; while he does focus on the use of fanaticism as a category with which to describe ‘dangerous religion’, Taylor also argues that ‘the fanatic’ was always a person perceived as going against ‘the order of mutual benefit’ (2007: 263). This civilizational ideal, described by Taylor as ‘polite society’, is threatened when a person fails to commit to the goal of productive cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

The narrative of fanaticism as the unequivocal enemy of Enlightenment is further complicated by exploring how different eighteenth-century authors debated both the usefulness of fanaticism and its relation to reason. While Voltaire indeed presents a mostly negative image of the fanatic – a violent zealot with a ‘gangrened’ mind who is the enemy of the tolerant and tranquil *philosophe* – other authors, such as Rousseau, defend the powerful passion of fanaticism which can be directed toward useful purposes such as patriotism (Mostefai and Scott 2009: 15; Toscano 2010: 106). When fanaticism is well-directed it can, according to Rousseau, inspire ‘genuine devotion to a community’ (Kelly 2009: 184); Voltaire and Rousseau’s polemic on fanaticism is thus connected to a broader discussion on the place of passion or affect in politics.

An additional topic of debate within Enlightenment thought is fanaticism’s relation to reason. While the dominant narrative directly opposes the concept to human reason, Toscano shows that many Enlightenment authors describe fanaticism as intimately connected to truth and rationality.

<sup>37</sup> This is illustrated for example by Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1912/1777) in which fanatics and enthusiasts are people or groups who do not take the public utility of their laws and actions into account. Fanatics are thus not only those committing violent and bloody acts in the name of religion – as in the work of Voltaire and Deleyre – but also those devoted to certain behavior that is ‘monkish virtuous’. ‘Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-

denial, humility, silence, solitude’, character traits considered virtuous by most of the major religions, should, says Hume, be seen as vices: ‘Because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society [...]. A gloomy, hare-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society’ (Hume 1912/1777).

'Perhaps fanaticism is not simply the absence of rationality, unreason, but reason unbound and unnatural' (Toscano 2010: 104). Even Deleyre, who first claims that 'truth makes no fanatics', later argues that fanaticism approximates justified conviction. This immanent treatment of fanaticism, which can also be found in the work of Kant, further complicates the concept's image as the antipode of Enlightenment.

In *Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment* (1997) Pocock, like Toscano, aims at pluralizing the narrative of a uniform Enlightenment program and its chosen enemy. Pocock focusses on 'enthusiasm' as a term intimately linked to fanaticism. While many Enlightenment authors use the two concepts synonymously, others make a – more or less clear – distinction between the two. As fanaticism is more often connected to violence – its etymology linking it to the bloody rituals in the temple (*fanum*) of Bellona – its danger is almost universally acknowledged. Enthusiasm, a term that harks back to the Greek *Enthousiasmos* which 'denotes the in-pouring or in-breathing of the divine', also becomes, like fanaticism, a 'term of abuse'. Nevertheless, says Toscano, it 'never seems entirely to lose the trace of a noble transcendence [...] towards the Good, The True or the Beautiful' (2010: 112). As we will see this is also the case with Kant's use of the term.

Pocock describes the process of 'secularization' of the term enthusiasm, which in time is not only employed to discredit those claiming to be in direct communion with a higher being, but to all those who claimed that 'ultimate reality poured itself into intelligence and directed its thoughts' (Pocock 1997: 16).<sup>38</sup> Whether this 'reality' was considered spiritual or material did not matter; materialist philosophies reduced both mind and matter to the same substance, thereby negating the border between mind and universe. Enthusiasm also became the term with which to address this philosophical error, which according to many could also be found in the work of Spinoza 'who abolished God by retaining him as identical in substance with his creation' (ibid: 18). This type of philosophical approach encouraged enthusiasm for 'it offered the mind opportunity to believe itself matter capable of consciousness and thought, and [...] to believe itself the active operation of a God who became actual through the operations of the mind' (ibid).

<sup>38</sup> Pocock describes the process of secularization in which the use of 'enthusiasm' alters over time. Used first as an intra-theological allegation against those claiming to speak directly to God, or to represent him on this earth, the term was used by seventeenth-century Anglican clerics against both popery and sects. While the former claimed that the church could be Christ's mystical body on

earth and have the 'pope speak with the authority of that body', the latter implied that the Spirit could directly enter the congregation (Pocock 1997: 13). Seventeenth-century treatises by Henry More and Méric Casaubon further intensify the English polemic on enthusiasm and introduce the idea that enthusiasm is a delusion, or a disease of the mind rather than a heresy.

These themes often recur in the work of eighteenth-century scholars: David Hume discusses ‘two species of false religion’, superstition and enthusiasm (1994: 46). While superstition, says Hume, can be defined as the worship of God in material objects and social practices, enthusiasm is its exact opposite, namely the worship of God in ‘the ideas that the human mind formed concerning it’ (Pocock 1997: 22). In this state of rapture the material world seems unworthy of attention and ‘full range is given to the fancy in the invisible regions or world of spirits, where the soul is at liberty to indulge itself in every imagination’ (Hume 1994: 47). The inspired enthusiast then ‘comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity’ (ibid).

While Hume clearly sees the danger of such a state of mind he also recognizes its value. While superstition is ‘favourable to priestly power’, enthusiasts are ‘free from the yoke of ecclesiastics’ (ibid: 48), and independent in their devotion:

[I]ts rapturous devotions are so fervent, that it even imagines itself actually to approach him by the way of contemplation and inward converse; which makes it neglect all those outward ceremonies and observances, to which the assistance of the priests appears so requisite in the eyes of their superstitious votaries (ibid).

This leads Hume to argue that enthusiasm is ‘naturally accompanied with a spirit of liberty; as superstition, on the contrary, renders men tame and abject, and fits them for slavery’ (ibid: 49). Enthusiasm harbors an anti-authoritarian spirit, precisely because it disputes the need for any mediation.

Pocock convincingly shows that this use of the term implies that Enlightenment’s preoccupation with enthusiasm cannot be understood simply as a battle against certain forms of religious inspiration. Enthusiasm, like fanaticism, was a polemical device which could also be aimed at non-religious ideas and philosophies. Moreover, both fanaticism and enthusiasm were often connected to values – such as liberty and radical social equality – which many now believe to be central to Enlightenment thought.

Furthermore, the two terms were not directly opposed to human reason, but often seen as states or phenomena that were intimately entwined with – or were even an inevitable result of – the workings of the human mind. These complexities also come to the fore when we look at Kant’s ideas on Islam and the Orient.

### ***Fanaticism and the limits of reason***

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the limitations and parameters of human reason are a topic central to Kant's work. He argues in his critical project that it is not possible to know things-in-themselves, nor do people have the capability of acquiring knowledge of the supersensible. One of the goals of Kant's philosophy is to distinguish reason's 'immanent legitimate uses [...] from its transcendent illegitimate ones' (Toscano 2010: 121). Fanaticism is one of the prime examples of reason's illegitimate uses, a form of thinking which breaks through the limits Kant so rigorously established. This concern with the limits of reason is already visible in his pre-critical discussion of the concepts of 'fanaticism' and 'enthusiasm'. In his attempts to distinguish between the two, the proximity of those actions and beliefs deemed fanatical to those considered legitimate, noble and universalizable becomes visible.<sup>39</sup>

The question of fanaticism first emerges in Kantian thought in the 1760s. In a footnote of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (2011a/1764) he makes an explicit distinction between enthusiasm [*Enthusiasmus*] and fanaticism [*Schwärmerei*]:

Fanaticism must always be distinguished from enthusiasm. The former believes itself to feel an immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature, the latter signifies the state of the mind which is inflamed beyond the appropriate degree by some principle, whether it be by the maxim of patriotic virtue, or of friendship, or of religion, without involving the illusion of a supernatural community (Kant 2011a/1764: 57).

Kant here defines fanaticism as a supposed personal connection with the transcendent, while enthusiasm is a state in which something inflames the mind, a form of affect out-of-bounds. In *An Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, published in the same year, Kant, with reference to Rousseau, emphasizes that enthusiasm, or 'the appearance of fantasy in moral sensations that are in themselves good' (Kant 2011b/1764: 213), is an important source of motivation. Although Kant's definition of a mind inflamed *beyond* the appropriate degree seems to imply a certain threat, he here argues that 'nothing great has ever been accomplished in the world without' enthusiasm (*ibid.*). A fanatic, however, is 'properly a deranged person with presumed immediate inspiration and a great familiarity with the powers of the heavens', and according to Kant 'human nature knows no more dangerous illusion' (*ibid.*)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Kant's work, it is argued by many, carries with it a certain form of transcendence in 'the guise of [...] universally binding abstract moral precepts, of authorities which in some sense lie beyond the domain of human and natural relations'

(Toscano 2010: 121). It is not surprising that Kant himself was sometimes considered a fanatic, both by contemporaries and, famously, by Nietzsche a century later (*ibid.*: 122).

Kant's distinction between fanaticism and enthusiasm overlaps somewhat with Hume's treatment of enthusiasm and superstition. As discussed above, Hume sees enthusiasm as 'the self-deification of the auto-intoxicated mind' (Pocock 1997: 22), the worship of one's own ideas in a state of inwardness, a definition that seems to share some characteristics with the Kantian notion of enthusiasm in that both are seen as connected to liberty, a form of reason that is free and beyond bounds. The fanatic, however, places 'mere objects of his own imagination outside himself, taking them to be things which are actually present before him' (Kant cited in Toscano 2010: 126). In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) Kant defines enthusiasm as *Wahnwitz* – madness of 'wit' or reason – and fanaticism as a *Whansinn* – madness of sense (see Zuckert 2010: 295). Where enthusiasm is associated with transcendent ideas and principles *within* the mind, fanaticism is thus seen as connected to the realm of the senses.

#### *The 'Islamic mind'*

The transgressions of reason accorded to both fanaticism and enthusiasm, are, in Kant's work, repeatedly associated with Islam and the Orient. After condemning fanaticism and defining it as a mental derangement in *An Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, Kant goes on to say that '[fanaticism] leads the exalted person to extremes, Muhammad to the prince's throne and John of Leyden to the scaffold' (Kant 2011b/1764: 213). As Luther did before him, Kant compares the Islamic prophet to one of the leaders of the Anabaptist rebels – those who first earned Luther's epithet *Schwärmer*. Elsewhere Muhammad is presented as both passionate and handsome, and the intoxicating use of opium is considered to be a central practice of Islamic faith (Almond 2010: 35). When Kant, in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, discusses the characteristics of different peoples, the trait of the 'unruly imagination', which is connected to both enthusiasm and fanaticism, is ascribed to the Arab and related to the success of the Islamic religion:

We find the Arab to be the noblest human being in the Orient, although with a feeling that very much degenerates into the adventurous. He is hospitable, generous, and truthful; but his tale and history and in general his sentiment always has something marvelous woven into it. His inflamed power of imagination presents things to him in unnatural and distorted images, and even the spread of his religion was a great adventure (2011a/1764: 58).

<sup>40</sup> While in the German text Kant clearly opposes the enthusiast (*Enthusiasmus*) and the fanatic ('*Fanatiker*' or '*Schwärmer*', '*Visionär*'), the translation used in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*

and other Writings (2011) edited by Paul Guyer and Patrick Frierson muddles up this distinction by translating '*Schwärmer*' with 'enthusiast'.

Ian Almond argues that Islam had a specific role in the work of Kant, even though his remarks on the topic are scarce and diffuse. 'Mohammedanism' represents a 'lurking possibility of radical delimitation, one which would overturn all kind of boundaries' (Almond 2010: 30). Associating Islam and the Arab with fanaticism, Kant 'mixes entomology and pathology' (ibid: 33). He reduces Islam to a malady or an 'outbreak', a case of *Schwärmerei* that could take hold of the masses (ibid; See Kant 2011b/1764: 213). The transgression of the limits of reason is thereby connected to a threat to 'real' boundaries, the threat of the spread of Islam, reminding the readers of the Ottoman armies on the European peripheries. Kant also emphasizes the restless nature of the Oriental, a restlessness connected to the constant motion of a nomadic lifestyle. Almond shows how images of the nomadic tribe, wandering, without respecting borders, are also mobilized against Kant's philosophical enemies. In *Critique of Pure Reason* he discusses the *skeptics*, who in their attacks on the empire of metaphysics introduced a 'reign of anarchy [...] like nomadic tribes, who hate a permanent habitation and a settled mode of living' (Kant cited in Almond 2010: 3).

As we saw above, while Kant denounces fanaticism, he considers enthusiasm to be of value. Even though enthusiasm, like fanaticism, is a transgression, a departing from the workings of normal human reason, inflammation *beyond* a proper degree, it can motivate and lead to great achievements. Islam is at times also associated with this more positive form of inflammation, especially when Kant discusses the topic of the sublime. In *Observations* Kant argues the Arabs are one of the peoples inclined to the sublime, and later in the *Critique of Judgement* (2007/1790) both Judaism and Islam are explicitly tied to the sublime on the basis of their prohibition of the image.

The sublime, according to Kant, has 'reference to our way of thinking', to the 'intellectual side of our nature and to the ideas of reason's supremacy over sensibility' (Kant 2007/1790: 104). It is situated somewhere between reason and the imagination, as the judgement of a sensation which he contrasts to the experience of beauty:

The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness (ibid: 73).

The sublime, Kant establishes, is not a feature of an object, but is something that inhabits our thinking. It is 'the mere capacity of thinking which evidences

a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses' (ibid: 81), a capacity which is in fact a requirement for Kantian reason. It is both this transcendence of the sensual and the representation of limitlessness which he attributes to the prohibition of an image of the Divine:

Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth etc. This commandment can alone explain the enthusiasm which the Jewish people, in their moral period, felt for their religion when comparing themselves with others, or the pride inspired by Mohammedanism (ibid: 104).

The 'removal of sensible barriers' says Kant, gives the imagination a feeling of being unbounded, and this in itself is a 'presentation of the infinite' (ibid).

It is untrue, says Kant, that the human imagination needs something sensible to hold on to in order to be motivated and to feel emotion. Here he even compares the sublime experience induced by the prohibition of the image to the sublimity of his own moral law which also defies representation. Both can induce enthusiasm, but will never lead to fanaticism:

This pure, elevating, merely negative presentation of morality involves, on the other hand, no fear of *fanaticism*, which is a *delusion* that would *will some VISION beyond all the bounds of sensibility*; i.e. would dream according to principles (rational raving). The safeguard is the purely negative character of the presentation. For *the inscrutability of the idea of freedom* precludes all positive presentation. The moral law, however, is a sufficient and original source of determination within us: so it does not for a moment permit us to cast about for a ground of determination external to itself. If enthusiasm is comparable to *delirium*, fanaticism may be compared to *mania*. Of these the latter is least of all compatible with the sublime, for it is *profoundly* ridiculous. In enthusiasm, as an affect, the imagination is unbridled; in fanaticism, as a deep-seated, brooding passion, it is uncontrolled. The first is a transitory state to which the healthiest understanding is liable to become at times the victim; the second is an undermining disease (ibid: 105).

The Jewish and Islamic prohibition of the image is further opposed to governments' tendency to embellish religion with 'images and childish devices' (ibid 105-106) as these induce passivity in the same way Hume thought superstition led to submission to priestly powers. Embellishing religion, says Kant, would inhibit certain capacities of the masses 'required for expanding their spiritual powers beyond the limits arbitrarily laid down for them' (ibid: 105).

Here again Kant's discussion of Judaism and Islam serves to function as an explication of his system of thought connecting epistemology, morality and autonomy. Kant's view, as discussed earlier, is that the human mind contains categories of understanding which form the basis for the cognition of phenomena; we cannot know objects in the external world as things-in-themselves, but can only gain knowledge by imposing the laws derived from reason *onto* the world of objects. In formulating moral rules we must not take as a starting point our contingent, context specific 'standing within the material world—this would enact the principle of heteronomy' (Mack 2003: 86). Falling prey to such heteronomy entails being unfree as well as unable to formulate moral principles. Kant's discussion of the prohibition of the image, which he opposes to state religion embellished with images, is thus not only a discussion of good versus bad religion, but also of correct and incorrect epistemology. The state religion critiqued by Kant is used as an example of the failure to accept the primacy of reason, and the lack of freedom such failure entails. Kant's discussions of fanaticism and enthusiasm thus illustrate Pocock's argument that these terms were also aimed at non-religious philosophies and ways of seeing the world, and at correct and incorrect workings of the mind. In Kant's discussion of the Orient, this failure to acknowledge the primacy of mind and reason over the sensible world of objects takes center stage.

#### *The 'Oriental mind'*

In *The Jew, the Arab. A History of the Enemy* (2003) Gil Anidjar argues that it was Hegel's reading of Kant's ideas on Jewish and Islamic sublimity which inspired the nineteenth-century development of 'The Semite', a category which included both Judaism and Islam, and which was used to position them both as joint enemies of the West (Anidjar 2003: 120) .

Hegel does indeed describe both Judaism and Islam as 'religions of the Sublime' but interprets this term in a way that is much more negative than Kant's understanding of it. Sublimity is defined by Hegel as 'the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation' (Hegel 1975/1835: 363). The Jewish and Mohammedan religions are sublime, Hegel argues, because they comprehend their unrepresentable God 'only under the abstract category of the one' (ibid). Their God is all-powerful, majestic and radically and completely separated from the world. The experience of the sublime in these religions is therefore an experience of complete subjugation. 'The smallness of Man and the World compared to the Creator engenders in the follower of the Religion of the Sublime the attitudes of a slave towards his master' (Kalmar 2012: 79).

In Hegel's teleological historical narrative, which progresses through the unfolding of the World Spirit, Judaism and Islam both represent a specific phase in which the Spirit does not yet recognize itself as concrete, 'as indwelling in the World' (ibid: 80). The Spirit is instead completely abstract, disconnected from the world and our concrete existence in it. 'The One of the Orient' Hegel states, is 'the One of Judaism, which, completed in Islam, becomes the religion of the Orient' (Hegel cited in in Almond 2010: 125). Islam is seen as an improved or purified version of Judaism, as it is cleansed of nationalism. Where in Judaism the abstract God was still connected to a particular people, Islam universalized this same abstract principle. It is in Christianity, says Hegel, that the abstract and the concrete are ultimately reconciled. Through the Trinity and the reincarnation of Christ the universal and the worldly are mediated. This phase Hegel connects with the European advance of Protestantism and the development of nations in which different local varieties of the Spirit took shape in a concrete *Volksgeist*.

Hegel connects the abstractness of the Oriental Spirit to a range of problematic characteristics, some of them familiar from the Enlightenment discourses on fanaticism discussed earlier. Not only are Judaism and Islam religions characterized by fear of, and subjection to, a great and distant God, but the radical decoupling of God from the concrete, Hegel claims, also leads to a total lack of respect for worldly order. Islam especially, having universalized the abstract spirit, is seen by Hegel as exhibiting a form of radical liberty, threatening this order. Islam rid itself from the particularity of nation – hence its transnational character and the nomadic nature of Islamic peoples – but also from that of *class*. In the expansion of Islam 'no particular race, political claim of birth or possession is regarded – only *man as a believer*' (Hegel 2001/1837: 374). This type of fanaticism, for Hegel, 'is the logical conclusion of a religion that opposes the divine One to all that is in the world' (Kalmar 2010: 83). The fanatical energy of 'the Mahometan' who 'is really indifferent to this social fabric, and rushes on in the ceaseless whirl of fortune' is compared by Hegel to the revolutionary terror of Robespierre (Hegel 2001/1837: 375). The Muslim's negation of the worldly can even go as far as the wish to offer his own corporeal existence to his God, for 'the highest merit is to die for the Faith. He who perishes for it in battle, is sure of Paradise' (ibid: 374).

There are some similarities in the ways Kant and Hegel describe Islam. Kant's comparison between Mohammed and the leader of the Anabaptist rebellion, and his account of Islam's expansion as an adventure inspired by an inflamed

imagination, mirrors the notions of fanatical and revolutionary energy present in Hegel's description of the Islamic faith. However, significant differences become apparent if we look at the dissimilar ways the two thinkers position Judaism, Islam and the Orient. Both Kant and Hegel construct an opposition between an idealized European civilization and a backward Orient. But while in Hegel's thought both Judaism and Islam, the religions of the sublime, are presented as characteristically Oriental, Kant's configuration of Islam/Judaism/Orient is more complex and ambiguous. This difference is in turn related to the contradictory ways Hegel and Kant delineate the sublime.

While for Hegel the experience of the sublime is defined as the subjection to an all-powerful abstract God, the Kantian sublime is ultimately linked to freedom and to reason. As Ivan Kalmar explains, the Kantian sublime does indeed start out with a feeling of 'abject humility' in the face of an object that defies representation. However, in a second step 'the mind recognizes that because it is able to contemplate the unrepresentable (and therefore sublime) object it – the mind – is actually greater than that object' (Kalmar 2010: 79). The ability to experience and appreciate the sublime for Kant is therefore not an obstacle but rather a precondition for the development of reason. In *Observations* Kant claims that 'true virtue alone is sublime' (Kant 2011a/1764: 22) and that this true virtue persists in acting *autonomously*, from universal moral principles. As I discussed in the opening section, for Kant a person is both autonomous and reasonable when he gives himself the moral law. This sublime virtue is a 'male quality' however, for women, Kant argues, are moved by feelings and 'engrossed in the immediacy of their senses' (Germana 2017: 25). This immersion in the sensual, claims Kant, inhibits rational self-legislation, and it is this ability, he argues, which is deficient both in women and in Oriental peoples (Battersby 2007; Germana 2017).

Contrary to Hegel, Kant thus creates an Orient that does not suffer from an overabundance, but from a *lack* of abstraction. Oriental peoples, Kant believes, are unable to exercise reason free from external, sensual influences. The image of being engrossed in the sensual is depicted in a very literal sense when Kant draws up the image of Oriental 'voluptuaries' who find it 'so soothing when they get their bodies massaged and all their muscles and joints softly pressed and bent' (Kant 2007/1790: 104). But besides a predilection for massages, the inability to transcend the concrete also entails the absence of conceptual thought:

All oriental peoples are like this; they represent all their concepts by means of images [...] it is almost completely impossible for Oriental people to speak by means of concepts. We have the Greeks to thank for it, that they first freed themselves from the jumble of images (Kant 2012a: 100).

Kant's vision excludes the Orient from the realm of morality, for the morals of Orientals are 'based on appearance' as they 'are not in the position to explain a single property of morality or of justice through concepts' (ibid: 197). This explains, Kant contends, the inevitability of Oriental despotism. As Orientals are unable to 'create the concept of freedom for themselves' they simply cannot imagine a form of government that is not 'monarchical and 'therefore always call the prince of Orange the "King of Holland"' (ibid: 497-498). The Oriental's inability to reason conceptually also makes Oriental peoples prone to fanaticism, and as Kant goes on to say, 'all people who are incapable of concepts, but who play with intuitive images of Spirits which are metaphorical, degenerate into fanaticism' (ibid: 112). Fanaticism is defined by Kant as a 'delusion that would will some vision beyond all the bounds of sensibility' (2007/1870: 105), thus a delusion of being able to see something, a delusion of sense (see also Battersby 2007: 71).

### ***Islam and Judaism in Kant's Orient***

Like Hegel, Kant constructs an Orient in an attempt to 'police and patrol the boundaries of Europe as a place of Reason, Reflection and Freedom' (Almond 2010: 119). The two are diametrically opposed when he claims that 'the Orient is the land of sensation, but the occident of sound and pure reason'. It is European civilization, Kant believes, where humanity's capacity for reason has developed most fully. This 'process of improvement' can be perceived also in the political constitutions of the European continent, 'which will probably legislate eventually for all continents' (Kant 1991: 52).<sup>41</sup>

The Kantian view of the sublime is, as we saw, in direct opposition with his characterization of the Orient. For where the sublime is connected to the abstract and unrepresentable, the Orient is steeped in feeling and images. This opposition raises questions about the positioning of Judaism and Islam in Kant's Orient, for as discussed above, Kant associates Islam with the sublime experience and the enthusiasm it encourages, and even Judaism is – through its prohibition of the image – connected to the sublime. This link between the two faiths and sublimity leads Christine Battersby to argue that

<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of Kant's eurocentrism and its connection to (cultural) imperialism see Tully (2008: 15-42).

Kant places Judaism and Islam 'on the side of the Enlightenment' albeit as 'passing phases on the way to an even more abstract religion' (Battersby 2007: 72). The Kantian Orient, Battersby argues, is constructed on the basis of ethnicity and race, whereas questions of true or false religion are 'kept apart' (ibid: 73). While the peoples of the Orient, she claims, are described by Kant as culturally – and sometimes racially – inferior, their religiosity plays no role in their classification as Orientals.

I want to argue that Battersby is correct in emphasizing the importance of ethnicity and race in Kant's construction of the Orient. It is important to keep in mind that for early modern European thinkers the topographical borders of the Orient are typically vague. However, the Orient is generally 'designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally' (Said 1979: 31) and thus included a vast range of peoples and places: 'Egypt, Arabo-Islamic peoples, Turkey, North Africa, the Middle and Far East and sometimes also India' (Battersby 2007: 68). Kant's work not only contains general characterizations of the sensual Oriental stuck in the world of direct experience, but also descriptions of the 'national characteristics' of different peoples that are part of the Orient. In his portrayals of 'Hindustan' and China, Kant deploys many features which he also used to describe the Orient as a whole: both peoples are, he claims, unable to use abstract reason. Therefore all the advances these cultures make must be the result of foreign influence (Germana 2017: 38). The rational capacities of the Turks, who, says Kant, do not even possess a national character, are also questioned (Kant 2006/1798: 222). Their use of Opium and their inability to overcome fear also seems to place them in the realm of sense and feeling (ibid: 155). A more positive evaluation is bestowed on the Persian, who is of good taste, and the Arab, who Kant considers to be 'the noblest human being in the Orient' (Kant 2011a/1764: 58). These national characteristics further intersect with Kant's hierarchical classification of different races. While the Western Orient – including the Arabs, the Turks and the Persians – is part of what Kant defines as the superior white race in which 'humanity has its highest degree of perfection' (Kant 2012b: 576) –although 'under the whites' one 'could make the division of the Oriental and Occidental kinds' (Kant 2012a: 321) – other peoples, like the Indian and the Chinese, are not considered white, and are therefore also a target of Kant's extremely derogatory racial characterizations.

It is important to emphasize that while Kant constructs separate taxonomies of races and of nations, it is not always clear what constitutes the nature of their difference. Kant infamously divides the world into four races which stem from a division of the world into different climate zones. Difference in race is connected by Kant to difference in taste, talent, and moral character:

In the torrid zones, humans mature more quickly in all aspects than in the temperate zones, but they fail to reach the same [degree of] perfection. Humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a somewhat lesser talent. The Negroes are much lower, and the lowest of all is part of the American races (Kant 2012b: 576).

A similar type of essentialism can be found in Kant's discussion of national characteristics where he claims it is possible to distinguish on 'what is distinctive in regard to the mind of an entire nation' (Kant 2012a: 197). In the case of nations this 'unique ingrained constitution' is again the result of 'climate and other causes' (ibid: 197). Both taxonomies thus seem at odds with his universalist notion that every human has the capacity to develop reason and thereby escape his 'self-incurred immaturity' (2009/1784:1).<sup>42</sup>

Battersby is also right in arguing that Islam, in Kant's work, is not described as an Oriental religion. Although his discussions of Islam are scarce and far from unambiguous, the religion is indeed more often connected to the transcendence of the material world, and the enthusiasm this inspires, than with the inability to overcome external circumstances. However, Battersby is incorrect in claiming that Judaism is similarly positioned in Kant's system of thought, for with the exception of his discussion of the prohibition of the image as a sublime passage of Jewish law, the Jew in Kant's work is presented as a prototypical Oriental; not only ethnically, when Kant describes the Jews as 'Palestinians living among us' (2006/1798: 100), but also religiously, for the opposition between Judaism and Christianity is constitutive of the opposition between Orient and Occident.

<sup>42</sup> There is much more to say about the nature of the relation between Kant's characterization of Judaism, the Orient and his infamous racial geography. In *Race: A Theological Account* Carter argues that the supersessionist notion of Christianity's overcoming of Judaism, which was secularized by Kant, lays the foundation of racial thinking. According to Kant only European people - through Christ's dying away from the worldly - could transcend their ties to the empirical world, thereby also overcoming their race. As race, according to Kant, was the result of material features such as geography and climate, those not able to overcome these ties - Jews, Orientals, blacks, etc. - remain seen as racially constituted (Carter 2008).

In the work of both Hegel and Kant, the Western-Orient is considered as vastly more civilized than, and superior to, sub-Saharan Africa and native-American 'red-Indians'. Hegel

even praises Islamic peoples, of which in general he had a very negative view, for their attempts to civilize the blacks of Africa (Almond 2010: 131). It is for this reason that Ivan Kalmar argues that scholars should avoid equating Orientalism with Euro-centrism or colonial ideology built on the notions of race, which 'was in all cases used in a discourse of inferiority that separated those marked by their racial identity (the "colored", those who were not "white") from those who were defined by their humanity' (Kalmar 2010: 23). For an analysis that avoids the collapse of the many different religious, ethnic, and racial hierarchies present in Kant yet still emphasizes the entanglement of his supersessionist theology, his racial geography, and colonial knowledge formations, see Westerduin (forthcoming).

As I illustrated earlier, the dominant view of Judaism in the work of Kant is that of a 'cult' unable to overcome empirical conditions because of their submission to a revealed law and their motivation by external rewards. This form of heteronomy which inhibits the exercise of free reason and self-legislation is, according to Kant, a characteristic of the Orient. The Oriental and the Jew cannot find a source of motivation outside of 'the circumstances of the world' in which they are placed (Kant 1998/1785: 3). They are thus consigned to living a life of 'moral servitude' (Kant 2011a/1764: 121) as their inability to reason conceptually withholds them from developing moral principles and to even imagine the notion of freedom.

The entanglement of these two oppositions – Judaism/Christianity and Orient/Occident – becomes most explicit when Kant decries the renewed Romantic appreciation of Hebrew and Egyptian poetry, exhibited, for example, by his own student Herder:

Would to God that we could be spared that oriental wisdom; nothing can be learned from it; the world has received no instruction from them but a kind of mechanical artifice, astronomy, numbers, etcetera. Once we had occidental education from the Greeks then we were able to lend some rationality to the oriental Scriptures, but they would never have made themselves understood on their own. To be sure there was once a wise man, who was entirely different from his nation and taught a healthy, practical religion, which for the sake of the times he had to dress up in images and old parables; but this teaching fell swiftly into the hands which spread the whole oriental nonsense over them, and once again set a stumbling block for reason (Kant in Germana 2017: 42).

The Orient is thus seen as unable to generate real science or real religion, and even the problematic aspects of European Christianity – which Kant argues is too often dressed up in 'images and childish devices' (2007/1790: 105-106) – are considered to be 'Oriental nonsense'. The philosophy of the Greeks, in Kant's thought, thus not only freed Europeans from Oriental reason – based on images and lacking concepts – but simultaneously freed them from Oriental (Jewish) religion by preparing the minds of the people for the truths of Christianity.

### Conclusion

In Kant's work Judaism and Islam are more systematically treated than in that of most of his predecessors, and his discussions of the two faiths have a clear function in the development of his philosophical position on the relationship between religion, morality, and autonomy, and his views on the limits of reason. This does not mean, however, that Kant's characterizations of the two faiths are less ambiguous than that of other Enlightenment thinkers. As we have seen, tensions exist between Kant's dismissive characterizations of Judaism as a mere cult, and his appreciation of the Jewish prohibition of Images which connects Judaism to the sublime. And while Kant shows admiration for the enthusiasm with which he associates Islam, the religion's excessive imagination and adventurousness also implies danger. We can in fact see in his work two prominent anxieties related to religion, namely, that it can inspire both complete subjugation as well as a radical liberty, making it into a potentially revolutionary force. While these two dangerous aspects of religion are seen as more or less contradictory by Kant, for Hegel they come together in his notion of 'Sublime religion'. In the second part of this thesis I will examine the way these two fears reappear in contemporary theory on the place of religion in the liberal state.

By discussing Kant's writing on Judaism and the Orient I have tried to show that the religious and ethnic hierarchies present in his work cannot be understood as simple prejudices common to his age. As Kant 'constructed the modern understanding of reason and freedom along the lines of a secularized interpretation of Christ's death on the cross', through which it was possible to transcend the material, embodied, and contingent, Jews and Orientals came to represent the exact opposite (Mack 2009: 602). In their inability to overcome their attachments to the worldly they were seen as deprived of reason, autonomy, and morality. His thoughts about religion are thus part of a broader vision which defines Europe not only as religiously superior but also as a place in which reason, freedom, and morality could fully develop. The opposition between Orient and Occident shows the intimate entanglement between categories of religion, ethnicity, and race in the thought of one of liberalism's most influential thinkers.

Kant did not solely contribute to the development of a modern interiorized notion of religion which privileges Protestant Christianity. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, an examination of Kant's thought does indeed bring a range of theological inheritances to light; however, these include not only a 'Protestant' definition of religion, but also a range of supersessionist binaries and concepts of fanaticism and enthusiasm

with long histories of use in intra-theological disputes. A focus solely on theological continuity, risks overlooking the flexible ways in which these concepts are used not only for establishing religious hierarchies but also for problematizing certain philosophical positions on the sources of knowledge and moral principles. Critiques that focus exclusively on the 'Protestant bias' that resides in a Kantian definition of religion further fail to recognize the interconnections between categories of religion, race, and ethnicity present in his work. It is this narrow focus on theological continuity that I will critically assess in the next chapter.

# Chapter 3

## **Exposing Political Theory's Theological Roots. Three Caveats\***

Political theorists have only recently started to reflect on their use of the concept 'religion'. As I discussed in the introduction of this thesis, they do so in response to critiques pointing out liberal political theory's unsatisfactory and partial construal of this concept. Many of these critiques draw attention to the specifically Western European historical trajectory in which a modern notion of religion took shape (Asad 1993; 2003; Hurd 2015; Sullivan 2005). Reflecting on the concept of religion has thus led to an interest in the genealogy of that concept and in that of related liberal ideals such as 'toleration', 'freedom of religion', and 'separation of church and state'. Those who want to explore the historical lineages of such concepts so central to contemporary liberal theory and practice, often trace them back to the work of European Enlightenment scholars. As discussed in chapter one, this can be explained by the fact that the Enlightenment is often characterized as both the period in which these central liberal axioms were first formulated and as the age in which the modern category of 'religion' was 'invented' (see for example Harrison 2002; Nongbri 2013; Sheehan 2003). What I will argue here is that reflections on the concept of religion in political theory often focus on one aspect of the concept's construal, namely its theological – or more specifically Christian Protestant – foundations.

\* This chapter is based on Blijdenstein, A. 2020. *Exposing Political Theory's Theological Roots:*

*Three Caveats. Patterns of Prejudice*, 54(1-2) , 109-122.

A genealogical approach to 'our' modern concept of 'religion' is frequently employed for making a claim about liberal democracy's dealings with religious groups and individuals. In its crudest form the claim is that the supposedly *secular* way of thinking about and governing religion is in fact thoroughly *theological*. A version of this claim can be found, for example, in the work of Saba Mahmood, who analyzes the workings of a modern right to religious freedom. A 'normative conception of religion' which 'privileges belief and conscience at the expense of practices, rites and rituals' informs the decisions of states and international courts where they balance the right to religious freedom with public order concerns (Mahmood 2015: 175). This conception is not only based on the distinction between belief and action, the *forum internum* and *forum externum*, but also on the difference between an interpretation of 'individual belief as an inner dimension of human consciousness and religion as a discursive tradition that undergirds the collective life of distinct communities' (ibid: 166). Defining religion as a matter of individual conscience appears minimalist and therefore universal, but, Mahmood states, it in fact 'has a specific Protestant genealogy and does not comport with other traditions' (ibid: 175).

Authors laying bare the Protestant origins of the liberal secular approach to religion often draw on the work of John Locke (1632-1704).<sup>43</sup> In Mahmood's work Locke makes several appearances as someone who influenced our current view of the *forum internum* as being an inviolable realm of individual conscience, and the extension of state jurisdiction over the *forum externum*, existing of worldly and bodily practice (Mahmood 2009: 853; Mahmood 2015: 166). In both De Roover and Balagangadhara's and Spinner-Halev's reflections on the Protestant nature of liberal toleration, Locke seems to shoulder responsibility for the theological inheritances present in the contemporary liberal treatment of religion (De Roover and Balagangadhara 2008; Spinner-Halev 2005). Locke's views, these authors claim, were essential for developing the central 'axioms of liberal political thought' such as 'the right to religious liberty and the separation of state and religion' (De Roover and Balagangadhara 2008: 543). His political thought, they argue, is inherently theological as it depends on the Protestant 'division of society into a temporal political kingdom and the spiritual kingdom of Christ' (ibid: 523). Our central liberal axioms thus depend on what is essentially a *religious*

<sup>43</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter Immanuel Kant is often attributed a similar role of a scholar who, through his universal definition of religion, contributed to the historical development of a

Protestant notion of religion as an interior belief or mental state. (See for example Asad 1993: 4). This chapter will focus on the critical genealogists' use and interpretation of John Locke's work.

division. This, the authors argue, ‘indicates that the modern liberal thought continues to be religious, since it conceals an essentially theological structure in secular garb’ (ibid: 540).

Not all authors pointing out the theological assumptions underlying liberal views on religion focus on the *Protestant* legacy influencing our conception of what religion really is or should be. When Robert Yelle argues that ‘law and politics have only apparently become separate from religion, but actually continue to be dependent on categories inherited from a theological past’, he places emphasis on theological oppositions which long precede the Reformation (Yelle 2011: 24). The Christian distinctions between spiritual and ritual, universal and particular, political or private, formulated in opposition to Judaism, he argues, are foundational for the contemporary treatment of religion: ‘In absorbing and displacing religion, secular law borrowed strategies that Christianity had used to marginalize and subordinate Judaism’ (ibid: 33).<sup>44</sup>

While bringing such inheritances to light is a worthwhile project, I believe that a singular emphasis on *theological continuity* present in the claim that ‘secularism does not recognize its functional status as a religion’ (ibid: 36) creates its own set of problems. In this chapter I will formulate three important caveats on adopting a genealogical approach to liberalism’s treatment of ‘religion’. I will point out the inherent risk of critiques that solely focus on the persistence of theological categories. A monolithic presentation of ‘the’ genealogy of religion, which claims that contemporary liberal ideas on, for example, religion, secularity, and tolerance are in fact ‘Christian’ or ‘Protestant’, I will argue obscures the importance of the different political and historical contexts in which these categories have played, and continue to play, a role.

### **Spiritual Christians, Legalistic Jews, Political Muslims**

One of the reasons for illuminating the theological roots of a liberal secular treatment of religion is the notion that such a hidden inheritance can have exclusionary effects. Mahmood argues, for example, that non-Protestant traditions are disadvantaged because the liberal right to religious freedom is based on a definition of religion as a matter of individual conscience. Jewish and Islamic rites and practices, she claims, are not as well protected by such a right (Mahmood 2015: 175). In her work on religious injury she focuses

<sup>44</sup> Yelle here draws on the work of Gil Anidjar who argues that ‘Christianity— which is to say, Orientalism—invented both religion and secularism. Consider, for example, how, recasting the sacred/

secular divide as a distinction between the Hebrews and all other nation’ (Anidjar 2006: 63).

on a different theological remnant in the modern, secular conceptualization of religion: the idea that religion is 'ultimately about belief in a set of propositions to which one gives one's assent' (Mahmood 2009: 852). Such a notion of religion, Mahmood argues, leads to a misunderstanding of those faiths in which religiosity is constituted in a greater part by lived and embodied practice, such as the tradition of Muslim piety. De Roover and Balagangadhara also contend that the hidden theological structure which underlies the liberal framework leads to exclusion: liberal principles and institutions 'are simply "unintelligible" for cultures unfamiliar with "Judeo-Christian" religion' (2008: 545).

One of the problems with this line of argument is that it runs the risk of adopting essentialist ideas about the nature of different religions. Andrew March, for this reason, criticizes the opposition between Protestantism and Muslim traditions of piety as presented in the work of Mahmood. It is based, he claims, on 'an utterly unconvincing opposition between habitus, affect and embodiment on the one hand and a concern with proposition, truth and belief on the other' and excludes 'much that is central to Islamic discursive traditions of piety and morality' (March 2012: 326).

In the previous chapters I discussed the ways in which the 'remaking of religion' in European Enlightenment thought was connected to representations of Judaism and Islam. In the work of Enlightenment thinkers Judaism and Islam were regularly perceived as particularistic, political, legalistic, materialist, or ceremonial forms of religiosity, characteristics that were in turn often associated with fanaticism, intolerance, and religious violence. De Roover and Balagangadhara's claim that '*Judeo-Christian* theology is the condition of intelligibility for the liberal theories of toleration' (2008: 244-245) is therefore especially curious. For what the authors consider to be the core of this theology - namely the radical separation between a public or political civil sphere and the individual spiritual sphere of religion - has historically been incessantly used to problematize Judaism as a *political* or *legalistic* religion that did *not* recognize this separation. Representations of Judaism and Islam and their adherents played a pivotal role in the self-perception of European thinkers and in the construction of the idea of a Christian European civilization free from the problematic characteristics projected onto these religious 'others'. However, the fact that the highlighting, or even construction, of certain religious differences could serve the ends of religious or political majorities is kept concealed when the genealogy of religion is understood as a process in which a 'Protestant theology' was translated into 'secular' terms.

This becomes apparent, for example, when looking at Montesquieu's theory on Islamic despotism which he developed in opposition to an idea of Christian freedom. Montesquieu famously argues that different religions support different moral and political structures. Christianity, he states, supports individual freedom, while Islam enslaves its people. Montesquieu emphasizes that both the Christian separation of worldly and political power, and the higher status it ascribes to women, allows that 'a moderate Government is most agreeable to the Christian Religion, and a despotic Government to the Mahometan' (Montesquieu 1989/1748: 461). The domestic servitude of women in Islam is, according to Montesquieu, connected to 'political slavery' and thus one of the reasons despotic government is better suited to 'Mohammedanism' (ibid: 316). This hierarchical ordering of Christianity and Islam is particularly ironic because it was formulated in a period in which most Christian Europeans were ruled by absolute monarchs. Annelien de Dijn shows that Montesquieu's tract was 'frequently invoked in the second half of the eighteenth century to bolster the case for royal absolutism' (de Dijn 2013: 67). Montesquieu's differentiation between Oriental despotism and European monarchism was used to defend the latter. The focus on Islamic despotism thus allows Enlightenment authors to remain quiet about existing religious and political practices and institutions.

The eighteenth-century French discussions about *la nation Juive* provide another example in which the characterization of a non-Christian religion, namely Judaism, disguises the societal and political privileges enjoyed by a Christian majority. The widespread concern that the Jews formed a 'nation within a nation' was attributed to the particularistic, legalistic, and political nature of their faith and not to the fact that until the Revolution, Jewish communities in France were subject to 'laws of exception' laid down in letters of patent, 'defining their rights and obligations in the kingdom' (Schechter 2003: 32). A focus on the political nature of Judaism was thus used to legitimize their exclusion from a range of liberties granted to Christians. The work of John Locke – De Roover and Balagangadhara's central character in religion's founding narrative – also contains such familiar derogatory representations of Judaism, both as a purely ceremonial and as a legalistic religion. In Locke's later works, such as *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) and *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1707) he aims to establish an opposition between a moral and spiritual Christianity and a harsh, legalistic and literal Judaism (Russo 2002). Locke's discussion of Judaism and the Mosaic Law here has a specific function, namely of salvaging the importance of (moral) works from the attacks of Calvinists who claimed it was *faith alone*

that led to salvation. Locke believed strongly that morality was founded in Scripture. Consequently, atheists and others who did not believe in rewards and punishment in the afterlife were not held by the 'bonds of society' (Locke 2003/1698: 246). 'Promises, covenants, and oaths', Locke argued 'can have no hold upon an atheist', as they are not morally motivated (*ibid*). The Christian gospel, according to Locke, *did* contain within it a 'duty to do good works' (Russo 2002: 218). However, Locke vehemently tried to distinguish this duty of living a moral life from the 'ritual observation of positive norms' characteristic of those following the Mosaic Law (*ibid*). Even though the Old Testament did contain ideas of a moral nature, the Jews were not able to interpret them in that way for 'they see not the spiritual and Evangelical truths contained in them' (Locke 1987/1707: 280).<sup>45</sup>

De Roover and Balagangadhara completely gloss over this aspect of the historical trajectory that engendered the modern concept of religion. They take at face value the idea of (Protestant) Christianity as a religion 'theologically' devoted to the salvation of the soul through inner faith and which can therefore be committed to both the separation of church and state and the idea of toleration, while other religions not sharing this theological starting point, cannot comprehend these principles. They thereby ignore the fact that the genealogy of religion contains representations of (Protestant) Christianity and non-Christian religions which should not be seen as neutral or objective descriptions of these religions' 'theologies'. In presenting the genealogy of modern religion as a process in which one religion's theological principles founded our liberal principles, the authors run the risk of repeating both a strongly idealized idea of (Protestant) Christianity and simplified, sometimes prejudicial, descriptions of non-Christian religions such as Judaism and Islam. Moreover, presenting the separation between church and state as founded on Christian theological principles conceals Christianity's historical and contemporary political entanglements. This brings me to the next point, namely that an emphasis on the theological foundations of the liberal framework of religion obscures the importance of the changing historical and political circumstances in which discussions

<sup>45</sup> Locke here paraphrases a passage from *2 Corinthians* 3 in which Paul refers to the veil Moses wore to cover his face when he returned from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments. The passage describes the manner in which the new Christian covenant supersedes the Jewish Law. While this veil still blinds the Jews, it is taken away by Christ: '14. But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken

away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. 15. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. 16. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. 17. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (King James Bible).

about religion, secularism, toleration, and non-establishment take place. For not only theology, but shifting political alliances, interests, and conflicts also play a role in religion's historical narrative.

### Theology or Politics?

Jeff Spinner-Halev, like De Roover and Balagangadhara, argues that liberalism's 'doctrine of religious toleration' is rooted in Protestant theology: 'the liberal conception of public and private has its origins in the (eventual) Protestant conception of privatized religion' (Spinner-Halev 2005: 32-33). These 'Protestant roots', he claims, make early liberalism tolerant towards religions that 'look' like Protestantism because they have 'the same general conception of religion' (ibid: 33).

As I argued in the previous section, this line of argumentation ignores the fact that the differences between (Protestant) Christianity and other religions were at least partly fabricated and can therefore not be presented as stable theological dissimilarities. Here I want to emphasize that Spinner-Halev's reasoning also ignores the fact that early modern discussions on toleration were strongly influenced by the political contexts in which they took place. Ideas about religious difference most certainly play a role in these discussions. However, it is important to examine the way in which these differences were *put to use* in serving different political interests. Both the work of John Locke and the discussions and policies of toleration in seventeenth-century England problematize the idea that early liberalism was internally tolerant and that Protestant theological principles were pre-eminent in the extension of tolerance.

Those authors who point out John Locke's role in the founding of a liberal – yet fundamentally Protestant – framework of religion often discuss his use of the category of 'adiaphora', or 'those religious activities that are deemed unnecessary to salvation' (Mahmood and Danchin 2014: 2). Despite the weight he attaches to moral works Locke also maintains that many religious activities and practices could be considered as morally *indifferent* and thus be brought under the jurisdiction of the sovereign. In his early work Locke's fear of civil strife leads him to argue *against* tolerance towards different forms of dissenting Christian worship, by stating that 'these differed from the orthodoxy of the state church only in marginal questions, those that could be considered "indifferent"' (Russo 2002: 203). Locke, however, defends the tolerance extended to the Jews and the few Muslims residing in England. He does so by arguing that every aspect of *these* religions, ceremonial or spiritual, was thought to be ordained by God. Not one element of these

religions, therefore, is part of the realm of *adiaphora*. Judaism is described by Locke as 'an outward form of worship cumbered with more ceremonies and circumstances' than any other religion in the world (Locke 1997/1660: 43). The Jewish God, Locke argues, 'descended to the lowest actions and most trivial utensils, not leaving out the very snuffers and firepans of the sanctuary' (ibid: 18). Furthermore, both their small number and their marginal position cause Jews and Muslims not to be seen as a threat to political stability. The extension of toleration to Christian dissenters, Locke feared, could cause political turmoil and conflict: for one 'must confess himself a stranger to England that thinks that meats and habits, that places and times of worship would not be [...] sufficient occasion of hatred and quarrels amongst us' (ibid: 8).

These early discussions put into question the idea of 'internal tolerance' discussed by Spinner-Halev. They also problematize the way in which scholars present Locke's thought as an indisputable example of early modern Protestantization of 'religion' which created the distinction between the *forum internum* and *forum externum*: a realm of belief and conscience that is *protected* by freedom of religion, versus the realm of external practices that can be *regulated* by the magistrate. Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) further questions the importance of the distinction between inviolable belief and *controlled* manifestation. In this famous work Locke *does* extend toleration to different forms of Christian worship that go against Anglican orthodoxy. He emphasizes that the external practices, symbols, and ceremonies that are part of religious worship should *not* be regulated by government, for 'things ever so indifferent in their own nature, when they are brought into the church and worship of God, are removed out of the reach of the magistrate's jurisdiction' (Locke 2003/1689: 233). Those externalities ordained by religion and scripture therefore, do not belong to the category of *adiaphora*.

Locke himself actually 'drew the limits of toleration on the basis of beliefs' (Bejan 2015: 585), as he famously refused to extend tolerance to Catholics and to Turkish Muslims – for their blind obedience to the Pope and the 'Mufti of Constantinople' respectively – as well as to atheists (Locke 2003/1689: 245-246). The beliefs of Catholics, Locke argues, prevent them from being loyal to their government, for they are obedient to the Pope 'who has the keys of their consciences tied to his girdle' (Locke 1987/1707: 152). Teresa Bejan convincingly shows that these limitations on tolerance stem from Locke's continual concerns about the dangers of disagreement caused by religious diversity. Arguments of public order and political stability, therefore, play a more central role in Locke's discussion of toleration than his (Protestant) opposition between conscience and indifferent practices. The

idea that a Lockean (and Protestant) conception of religion as firmly located in the realm of individual conscience underlies not only the liberal notion of toleration, but also that of the separation between church and state, is further problematized when one takes into account Locke's failure to question the many privileges that befell Anglican Protestantism. While Locke did indeed argue for a relatively wide toleration of different forms of worship he did not explicitly problematize such facts as, for example, that the rights to hold public office and to enter university were limited to members of the Anglican Church. While Locke thus excluded Catholics from toleration because of the *political nature*<sup>46</sup> of their religion, the connections between Protestantism and the state were not problematized.

Rachel Weil looks at a specific anti-Catholic policy implemented after England's 1688 Revolution to argue that 'whether a religion comes to be described as either "mere religion" or as a form of political ideology has much to do with the political agendas of those who describe it' (2011: 83). She discusses the post-Revolutionary introduction of an 'unprecedented doctrinal test' (ibid) used to identify Catholics in order to disarm these potential rebels and dispel them from the London area. Previous tests of political allegiance – consisting of an oath of allegiance to the English monarch and the denouncement of the Pope's right to depose princes – had left open a theoretical opportunity for subjects to reconcile Catholic belief and state loyalty. The 1689 test to 'identify a category of political suspect' consisted of a declaration in which the subject had to deny the belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation and affirm that 'the invocation of the virgin and saints, and the sacrament of the Mass' as used in the Church of Rome, were 'superstitious and idolatrous' (ibid).

The introduction of this *belief*-based test, which cemented the long-familiar 'equation of Catholicism with disloyalty' (ibid: 96) in new ways, cannot be understood from a perspective which takes the theological differences between Anglican Protestantism and Catholicism as a starting point. Instead, argues Weil, it was the political struggle among Protestants which motivated the enactment of new security legislation against Catholics. The Glorious Revolution created divisions within the Anglican state church and for the first time confronted legislators with the problem of *Anglican disloyalty*: some members of the state church refused to plead allegiance to the new monarchs. The new doctrinal test of allegiance 'minimized both the exposure and the punishment of disloyal Anglicans, while maintaining a

<sup>46</sup> For a further exploration of the liberal intolerance towards certain forms of religion 'perceived to be connected, through religious affiliation or beliefs,

with arbitrary or absolute power' see Rae (2018: 294).

sharp line between Catholics and Protestants' (ibid: 82) and was hence used to maintain stability and to preserve the power of established political and religious institutions. To understand the introduction of the test one should examine how the line 'between so-called mere religion and religion-that-is-really-politics' was drawn, 'who got to draw it, and what needs did that line serve?' (ibid: 83-84). Again, we see the significance of the political context in the constructing, highlighting, or problematizing of certain religious differences. The role of political interest remains hidden when focusing on theological continuities.

### **Theology, Culture, Ethnicity, Nationality**

Lastly, I want to argue that those authors who focus on the theological roots of the modern concept of religion should be cautious of not overlooking the way the category of religion interacts with other categories such as culture, ethnicity, nationality, race, and class. Critical work on the bias created by a supposedly Christian or Protestant conception of religion maintains a strong focus on 'religion' as an essential category for understanding plurality and political conflict. The response to the recognition of these Protestant privileges seems rather straightforward: broaden up the legal and social definition of religion to include those religions that do not fit the Protestant mold. These types of critiques stay 'within the religio-secular paradigm', questioning only the modern *definition* of religion and not 'what it means to rely on religio-secularism as a lens for investigating culture, ethnicity, and religion in politics (and religion in political conflict specifically)' (Jansen 2017: 370; see also Dressler 2019). Tracing the historical trajectory in which modern ideas about religion took shape not only enables us to analyze how new definitions of religion were produced, but also helps question the dominance of this 'religio-secular' lens.

The long eighteenth century was a period in which 'religion was remade and given new forms and meanings' (Sheehan 2003: 1077). A focus on the persistent nature of Christian theological concepts, however, suggests *continuity* and overlooks the transformations that took place. One of these transformations was the way in which Christianity came to be seen as a marker of European, or sometimes national, culture or civilization. The period's views on Judaism, Islam, and other 'others' show how 'religion' became entangled in the creation of ethno-cultural hierarchies. This becomes visible in the work of Montesquieu, who connects religion and culture as both being outcomes of the climate in which people live, and in the work of those Enlightenment scholars who project problematic features, such as fanaticism

and despotism, onto Judaism and Islam so as to imagine a Christian Europe free from such characteristics.<sup>47</sup>

Another example from eighteenth-century England illustrates the inseparability of religion and other identity-markers: the introduction of the 1753 Jew Bill, which would have allowed for the naturalization of a small group of wealthy foreign-born Jewish merchants and which was repealed after popular uproar. The heated debates following the passing of the bill show that opponents projected ‘British concerns about the integrity of the nation and the internal threats of faction and deep division onto the Jews’ (Rabin 2006: 165). In parliamentary debates and in the pamphlets and prints produced after the bill’s passing, Jews were depicted as a multi-dimensional danger. Some opponents of the naturalization act focused on the Jews’ ‘blasphemous religion’ and bizarrely portrayed the Jews as conspiring to circumcise all Christian men after their naturalization. Others challenged the bill by depicting the Jews as one of many groups of non-natives trying to gain access to Britain. The bill was passed in the context of intense debate on the extension of British citizenship to both Protestant and non-Protestant ‘aliens’ settling in the American colonies (Hyamson 1908-1910: 158). Other arguments focused on the Jews’ economic status. It was feared that Jewish merchants would buy up estates and compete with British traders. Moreover, because the Jews supposedly always ‘kept apart’, it was argued that their commerce would not benefit anyone but themselves. Others worried that the bill would cause an influx of poor Jews who would become a burden on the British state. A different line of opposition explicitly connected the bill to the extension of toleration for Catholics and dissenters. Even though the naturalization bill was in no way connected to an extension of civil liberties to English Jews, it was described as a ‘popish plot’, a ‘slippery slope that would lead to full civil rights for Nonconformists and Catholic emancipation’, something which would increase the chance of rebellion and political instability (Rabin 2006: 163). The debates on the Jew Bill thus show how different interrelated concerns about the unity of Britain were connected to the naturalization of a small and relatively powerless minority: anxieties about religious unity; about continued political division and threats of civil unrest; the nation’s permeability to foreign influences; and economic competition in the context of Britain’s imperial projects. Thus the complexity of the Jews’ position as a minority in England cannot be grasped by looking solely at their religious difference.

<sup>47</sup> See Westerduin (2020) for a discussion of the entanglement between religion and race. This entanglement, which has premodern origins,

has been made invisible by the dominance of the religio-secular lens, Westerduin argues.

The case of the English Jew Bill illustrates that a genealogical approach which centers on uncovering Protestant inheritances presents an overly narrow and one-dimensional view of the historical trajectory in which modern ideas about religion evolved. Ideas about religion were formed in interaction with ideas about nationality, culture, citizenship, ethnicity, race, and class. A broader genealogical approach should trace the co-constitution of 'religion' with these other categories and take special notice of their intersections. We can thus not only paint a less constricted picture of this historical trajectory itself, but also critique contemporary liberal engagements with religion from this broader perspective. The critical approaches discussed above can usefully expose the Protestant bias present in both contemporary liberal theory and political and legal institutions which depend on certain exclusionary definitions of religiosity; however, in doing so they maintain a focus on 'religion' as the central category through which to interpret plurality, conflict, and the accommodation of diversity.

[This] tends to hide from view all of the majority-minority relations, power inequalities, class and colonial history, everydayness, migration histories, histories of imaginaries, and stereotypes in intercultural memory that are relevant to understand the position of these minorities— as well as the genealogy of the concept of 'minority' (Jansen 2017: 374).

To explain this further I want to come back to Saba Mahmood's work in which she analyzes the workings of the right to religious freedom in European law. Mahmood discusses several legal cases in which the European Court of Human Rights decided in favor of states wanting to forbid the exercise of Islamic practice – mainly the wearing of the veil in public institutions. She argues that 'the ongoing litigation in Europe around Islamic and at times Jewish practices that do not accord with a privatized conception of religion points to the religious truth internal to European law' (Mahmood 2015: 175). The Protestant conception of religion as a matter of individual conscience 'recasts' the wearing of the veil as an 'adiaphorous act' which is therefore 'subject to civic regulation' (ibid: 170). When Nehal Butha analyzes the same cases, he highlights another dimension of the ECtHR verdicts, namely the substantive judgements on the practice of veil wearing that are part of these court rulings. Judges, he shows, explicitly

<sup>48</sup> Yolande Jansen argues that 'the political-historical nature of the fanaticism-piety-violence nexus should be integrated into any plausible concept of postsecularism' (Jansen 2011b: 981), for

the history of the political use of fanaticism is a fundamental part of the historical trajectory in which a modern notion of religion took shape.

describe the Islamic practice of veil wearing as threatening democratic values such as tolerance, equality, and non-discrimination. The decisions further show an interpretation of the veil as a harbinger of ‘religious strife’, as can be read in the judges’ concerns that schools that allow teachers to wear veils will become ‘places of religious conflict’ (Butha 2014: 11).

The connections made between the veil and intolerance, and the veil and sectarian conflict, cannot be fully understood from the perspective of the Protestantization of religion, or the dominance of a definition of religion as individual conscience. To understand these connections it is necessary to embrace a broader historical perspective – one that considers, for example, colonial histories, ethno-cultural stereotypes, political imaginaries of Muslims and Arabs, and discourses on the relationship between religious signs and fanaticism<sup>48</sup> – and analyze the actual political contexts in which this broad range of historical tropes and discourses become once again productive.

### Conclusion

I have argued that the claim that the liberal secular approach to *religion* is in fact religious or founded in *theology* produces several blind spots. Those critiques of the liberal framework that focus on uncovering its Christian or Protestant roots run the risk of perpetuating essentialist ideas about the nature of different religions, and of overlooking the importance of historical and contemporary political contexts in shaping discussions on religion. Furthermore, these genealogical approaches fail to question the religio-secular perspective on social plurality and conflict, and often ignore religion’s interaction with other categories such as culture, civilization, nationality, and ethnicity.

This does not mean, however, that theological inheritances play *no* role in contemporary discussions about diversity and the place of religion in the modern state. I believe the tracing of these inheritances and their exclusionary effects can be productive, but only if one does so with an understanding that these legacies are not static but continue to be put to use in changing political and historical contexts. This approach to theology is most eloquently described by Jonathan Sheehan:

To boil it down to some sacred essence misses the heterogeneous reality of its appearance. Theology, like politics, is not an essence, but a set of claims that appear in time, and with specific empiricities of their application. Rather than use its appearances and disappearances to chart (ever anew, because ever in vain) the divide between sacred and secular, it seems worth our energies to focus exactly on the empiricities. Maybe by doing this, we can start to rethink larger categories—of secularization, of modernity, to name two—less as norms for a world writ large, and more as claims evoked in situations local and particular; less in terms of puzzling absences and persistences, and more in terms of their real dynamism and contingency. In this we historians and other critics would be giving up our jobs as demystifiers of the secular and the modern, and instead, content ourselves with something less grand, yet more truthful, I think, as careful listeners to the social, political, and religious languages that people speak and find persuasive in their lives (Sheehan 2011: 77).

# Chapter 4

## **Containing a ‘Destructive Potential’. Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere**

In the first part of this book, I discussed the ways in which religion was remade and given new forms and meanings in early modern thought. By looking at Enlightenment representations of Judaism and Islam I showed that the development of a modern idealized conception of religion was accompanied by a variety of interconnected ideas concerning religion’s problematic and dangerous characteristics. Enlightenment scholars deemed what they considered to be legalistic or political forms of religion, religious particularism, and visible religious signs and practices as problematic by relating them to fanaticism, violence, and intolerance. The second part of this thesis traces the legacies of these Enlightenment representations of religion within contemporary liberal political theory on state-religion relationships. It thereby explores the idea that religion is a special source of conflict and violence, and will look at how this idea is ‘inscribed in the tradition of (political) liberalism’ (Spohn 2013: 127). This chapter will do so by analyzing the ways in which religion features in the work of Jürgen Habermas.

The German intellectual is one of the most prominent contributors to recent debates on religion in the public sphere. His writings on religion since his 2001 speech *Faith and Knowledge* show a much-discussed revision of the views he presented in the last century. In various essays written after this date Habermas has shed the earlier secularist approach in which he called for the privatization of religious belief. As the 'secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization' is losing ground, believing and non-believing citizens face the challenge of cooperating with each other in an increasingly diverse political community (Habermas 2008a: 21). The requisite mentalities for facilitating such collaboration, Habermas asserts, can be obtained by the 'complementary learning processes' of both secular and religious citizens (2006: 18). The notion of a 'postsecular society' developed by Habermas thus has both a descriptive aspect – in modern societies religion remains relevant – and a normative aspect referring to what secular and religious citizens in these societies can 'reciprocally expect from one another' (2008a: 21).

In this chapter, I focus on one of the normative implications of postsecularism in particular, namely Habermas' argument that a postsecular society does not 'preclude the permissibility of religious utterances in the political public sphere' (ibid: 28). The liberal state, argues Habermas, cannot and should not ask its religious citizens to justify their political viewpoints 'independently of their religious convictions' (Habermas 2006: 8). It should not exclude religious reasons because this would unfairly disadvantage religious citizens and contradict the principle of equal treatment. Furthermore, Habermas emphasizes that there are *substantive* reasons for 'unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere' (ibid: 10). Religious traditions, he believes, have a *unique* ability to articulate moral intuitions; by banning religious expressions from public debate, the liberal state would very possibly 'cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity' (ibid).

Habermas develops a genealogical argument which compels secular thought to 'break with the self-immunizing mindset that closes itself off against any historical reflection on the context out of which it developed' (Habermas cited in Allen 2016: 240). In doing so he explicitly acknowledges the formative role of religious traditions in the development of supposedly secular categories, norms, and values. Such a genealogical approach could be used to challenge the sharp opposition between the religious and the secular, and to question the idea posed by some secularists that religious citizens and their viewpoints are fundamentally 'different' and thus cannot be taken seriously as participants in political deliberation. However, his discussion of the role of religious arguments

in the public sphere reveals a range of assumptions familiar from the secularist repertoire concerning the distinctive nature of religion and the unique challenges it poses to the liberal-democratic state. Relatedly, Habermas develops a very narrow idea of the forms of religion that can contribute to political contestation in a post-secular society.

I shall first examine several dangerous features Habermas attributes to religion. I will show how Habermas connects religion to authoritarianism, dogmatism and – ultimately – to political violence. Then I look at the way in which Habermas' recognition of religion's specificity reveals a contested connection between rites and particularism. In the second part of the chapter the focus will be on the way Habermas construes his specific idea of the legitimate religious speaker who can successfully contribute to political decision-making. Habermas, I will argue, puts forward a binary in which religion is either fully reflexive or associated with fanatical truth-claims that pose a threat to the political order. Finally, I will discuss how this binary plays out in Habermas' treatment of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His discussion of these three specific religious traditions, I argue, further illustrates his deeply ambivalent idea of religion as both an origin of conflict and moral motivation.

### **Religious Arguments and the Neutral State**

The principle of separation of church and state, Habermas argues, 'obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate and justify laws, court rulings, decrees and measures only in a language which is equally accessible to all citizens' (2006: 5). While the neutral state should thus keep an equal distance from all religious worldviews, this does not prohibit the use of religious arguments in the political public sphere: 'the informal flows of political communication and opinion formation among the broader public of citizens' (Habermas 2008a: 28).

Making his claim for a more generous acceptance of religious views in the public debate, Habermas departs from the critiques on John Rawls' notion of 'public reason'. Like Habermas, Rawls believes rules that are generally binding should be justified by reasons that all citizens could accept. Rawls, however, extends this duty of public reason to the informal public sphere. All citizens should ideally, act *as if* they were legislators, and thus provide their fellow citizen with reasons independent from their particular religious, moral, or philosophical 'conception of the good' (Rawls 1999a: 135). He adds that citizens may introduce their 'comprehensive doctrines' into the political debate but only when 'in due course [...] properly public reasons' are brought forward to support the claim that is made (Rawls 1999a: 144).

Along with several other authors (see for example Bader 2007: 75; Cook 2006: 196) Habermas argues that Rawlsian public reason places an asymmetrical psychological burden on those citizens 'who follow a faith' (Habermas 2006: 9). They are asked to take on a 'split-level view of the self' (Bader 2007: 75), separating their religious and political identities, something that might not be achievable for every citizen. The principle of equal treatment prescribes that persons 'neither willing nor able to divide their moral convictions and their vocabulary into profane and religious strands must be permitted to take part in political will formation even if they use religious language' (Habermas 2008a: 28-29).

Habermas thus argues for an institutional threshold or 'filter' between the formal public sphere (e.g. parliaments, courts, administrations, and ministries) where non-religious reasons are allowed *exclusively*, and the informal arenas of public deliberation in which religious viewpoints can be introduced.<sup>49</sup> All citizens, he states, must accept that 'only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold' (Habermas 2006: 9). Again, so as not to encumber religious citizen with an asymmetrical burden, Habermas emphasizes that the 'translation' of religious arguments – a process in which they can be reformulated into secular terms so their 'truth content' can be taken into account in political decision-making processes – is a jointly cooperative task of both religious and secular citizens.<sup>50</sup> Apart from this call for an 'institutional translation proviso' (ibid: 10), Habermas' treatment of public reason differs from that of Rawls in an additional way; while Rawls argues that all comprehensive doctrines, both secular and religious, should be kept out of political deliberation, Habermas repeatedly singles out religion.<sup>51</sup> Religion's specific characteristics are appealed to, both when disputing the possibility of separating religious and political identities, and when arguing for religion's strict exclusion from the formal public sphere. Habermas' treatment of these specificities reveals how he connects religion – implicitly and explicitly – to authoritarianism and dogmatism.

<sup>49</sup> Spohn argues that this strict exclusion of religious arguments from decision-making processes in political and legal institutions, shows that Habermas' theory is not as accommodating to religious arguments as he himself proposes it to be (Spohn 2015a: 123). While Rawls' duty of 'public reason' is formulated as a moral duty or 'duty of civility' (Rawls 1999a: 136) Habermas' exclusion of religious argument from political institutions is a 'legal duty'. This becomes apparent when he argues that in parliament religious arguments should be struck from official transcripts (Habermas 2006: 10)

<sup>50</sup> Habermas' notion of translation has been fiercely criticized (see for example Arfi 2015; Cook 2006; Kerkwijk 2015).

<sup>51</sup> In the next chapter I will argue that even though Rawls does not single out religion, his conception of 'comprehensive doctrine' does reveal certain implicit assumptions about the nature of religion. See also Jansen who argues that Rawls has remained wedded to the Protestant idea that religious or metaphysical views tend to be 'doctrines', as in 'comprehensive doctrines' (2017: 382).

### Religious truth claims and conflict

The fact that Habermas *singles out* religious arguments as reasons that should be kept out of formal institutions, and as being in need of ‘translation’, comes as somewhat of a surprise if one looks at the ‘post-metaphysical awareness’ he asks of secular citizens (Habermas 2006: 16). In a post-secular society, secular citizens are explicitly asked to refrain from ‘ontological statements on the constitution of the whole of beings’ and from ‘passing judgment on religious truth’ (ibid). Non-religious citizens should self-critically examine the limits of ‘secular reason’ and thereby come to reject a ‘scientifically limited conception of reason’ which excludes religious doctrines from its genealogy (ibid).

However, Habermas does not ask for the ‘cooperative translation’ of secular reasons that do not answer to these standards. In fact, ‘nothing seems to prevent metaphysical secular arguments, deriving from secular philosophies or world-views, from reaching the formal public sphere and producing their full effect there’ (Spohn 2015a: 123). This can be explained by the fact that, unlike Rawls, Habermas contends that religious convictions cannot be analogized with, or assimilated to secular ethical conceptions. Religious beliefs have certain characteristics which distinguish them from secular convictions. These characteristics allow them to be singled out as constituting a unique problem for democratic deliberation:

By dint of their possibly even rationally defended reference to dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revelatory truths, religiously rooted existential convictions evade that kind of unreserved discursive deliberation to which other ethical orientations and worldviews, i.e., secular ‘concepts of the good’ expose themselves (Habermas 2006: 9).

Religious convictions, Habermas believes, contain a *core* of revelatory truths that cannot be penetrated by deliberation. This ‘opaque core’ can only be circled and remains ‘abysmally alien to discursive thought’ (ibid: 17). Furthermore, this core exercises ‘dogmatic authority’ over the believer. Although Habermas acknowledges that secular citizens must learn to ‘distinguish their conceptions of the “good life” [...] from *generalizable* interests and *universal* standards of justice’, religious citizens, by nature of their beliefs, bear a *particular* burden: ‘For what is of vital importance for religious citizens are not “values” but “truths”; whereas values are ordered transitively, truths obey a binary code’ (Habermas 2013: 375).

It is this notion of religious belief as a matter of *truth* that Habermas uses to explain why religious believers will necessarily clash with those adhering to worldviews that differ from their own:

As soon as the idea of the correct life takes its orientation from religious paths to salvation or metaphysical conceptions of the good, a divine perspective (or a "view from nowhere") comes into play from which (or from where) other ways of life appear not just different but *mistaken* (Habermas 2008b: 309).

While different value orientations are not mutually exclusive, *different truths are*. The impenetrable religious core of revelatory truth does not allow for compromise. Although it seems as if Habermas does not single out religion in the quote above – as he mentions metaphysical conceptions of the good as well – he gives no examples of non-religious metaphysical conceptions that include a similar 'divine perspective'. In the rest of the essay he continually opposes the religious to the non-religious citizen and claims that 'secular consciousness has no difficulty in recognizing that an alien ethos has the same authenticity and the same priority for the other that one's own ethos has for oneself' (Habermas 2008a: 309). Habermas therefore singles out religion as a special source of conflict. Conflicts between religious doctrines 'cannot be laid to rest at a cognitive level' (Habermas 2006: 13). It is for this reason that Habermas argues for the strict exclusion of religious reasoning from the institutions of the state. With the opening of the political arena to religious truth the political community would be in 'danger simply of disintegrating into religious struggle' (ibid: 12).

Habermas' assumptions about the characteristic connection between religion and dogmatic authority, which makes religious belief inherently less open to deliberation and compromise, are criticized by several authors. Ulrike Spohn argues that Habermas' treatment of religious belief is illustrative of a 'theory of religion underlying political liberalism which grasps it as an essence related to characteristics like dogmatism, blind obedience and inability to compromise' (2015b: 128). Such an essentialist view of religion, she argues, does not take into account research on the multifaceted causes of contemporary conflict, nor does it contain an accurate grasp of the role religion plays in people's lives (ibid: 130). Maeve Cooke focuses on Habermas' conflation of religious and authoritarian arguments. She contends that 'both philosophical and religious arguments appeal to "dogmas" in the sense of core convictions' (Cook 2013: 255), and even these core convictions can change over time. According to Cooke, Habermas overlooks the fact that religious belief is not always 'authoritarian' in the sense that it contains 'religious instructions to live one's life in a certain way' which 'must be accepted as valid, irrespective of the reasoning powers of those to whom they are addressed' (ibid). It would therefore make more sense for Habermas to ban *authoritarian* arguments from the political arena, without singling out religious arguments.

Spohn and Cook thus emphasize Habermas' portrayal of religious belief as something constituted by a core of dogmatic truth claims which serve as unquestioned authority in the lives of the faithful. This depiction of religion as a set of propositional claims to truth, a form of doctrine that lays 'claim to explaining man's position in the world as a whole' (Habermas 2006: 13), has also provoked other critiques. Christoph Baumgartner argues that Habermas' treatment of religion is too focused on 'epistemic attitudes that are situated on a cognitive level' (2014: 78). If one sees religion as a set of *convictions* about the world and man's position in it, one overlooks religion's emotional and bodily aspects. This leads Baumgartner to argue that Habermas works with a 'liberal "Protestant" notion of religion' (ibid: 80). However, when one looks more closely at Habermas' numerous writings on the topic, one has to conclude that his treatment of the concept is less one-dimensional than the above criticism implies. This becomes apparent both when looking at Habermas' use of the notion of 'piety' and at his most recent discussions on the importance of ritual.

In *Religion in the Public Sphere* (2006), the same essay in which Habermas defines religious conviction as ultimately referring to the 'dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revelatory truths', a different conception of religious belief is posited. When Habermas questions the legitimacy of the asymmetrical mental burden that a Rawlsian notion of public reason places on religious citizens, he once more does so by referring to the *unique* nature of religious belief. Here, however, he does not invoke religion's connection to an ultimate core of truth, but instead emphasizes a different characteristic of religious views:

There is a normative resonance to the central objection as it relates to the integral role that religion plays in the life of a person of faith, in other words to religion's 'seat' in everyday life. A devout person pursues her daily rounds by drawing on belief. Put differently, true belief is not only a doctrine, believed content, but a source of energy that the person who has faith taps performatively and thus nurtures his or her entire life (Habermas 2006: 8).

For religious people, Habermas states, it is therefore impossible to establish an artificial separation within their own minds 'without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons' (ibid). Religious citizens, Habermas argues, believe their whole existence should be guided by their religious convictions. Because they 'strive for wholeness' (ibid) they cannot simply separate their private and political existence.

This totalizing trait of a mode of believing that infuses the very pores of daily life runs counter, the objection goes, to any flimsy switchover of religiously rooted political convictions onto a different cognitive basis (ibid).

As Yolande Jansen argues, in contrasting religious faith as a 'source of energy' with faith as doctrine, Habermas uses a 'philosophical language' close to the one Saba Mahmood uses to explain 'the insight that faith is not something mental in the first place' (Jansen 2011b: 991). However, Habermas then directly assigns to this form of 'piety' a 'totalizing trait', which, argues Jansen, has an 'immediate political ring to it' (ibid). Habermas' description of the 'pious' or 'devout' person as someone whose life as a whole is imbued with religious energy reveals connections with those historical traditions which reflected on religious enthusiasm and fanaticism as motivating but potentially uncontainable (political) forces.

We thus see that in his plea for the *inclusion* of religious argument in public debate and its *exclusion* from the formal political sphere, Habermas implicitly defines religion as something that is both totalizing in its perfusion of every aspect of a person's life, and in its claim to possessing dogmatic truth exercising authority over the believer. Habermas thus follows tradition linking religion 'implicitly and automatically to potential political violence against those who do not possess the truth' (Jansen 2011b: 992), even when he does not hold onto the typically Protestant understanding of religion in terms of doctrine and belief. In the second part of this chapter I will show how these dangerous characteristics are ascribed to *non-reflexive* forms of religion in particular, and how Habermas singles out Islam as an example of such a religion. Before doing so I look at a different dimension of religion in Habermas' recent work, namely the priority that he gives to religious *praxis*, and the connection he established between rites, community solidarity, and religious particularism.

### **Religious rites, membership, and particularism**

In writings, interviews, and lectures Habermas has responded to the critics who objected to his description of religious belief as inherently *different* from secular notions of the good, and has addressed the strict separation between religious and non-religious arguments that springs from this difference. In his most recent responses to these objections he does not emphasize religion's dogmatic core, nor its totalizing energy, as religion's most distinguishing features; instead he looks at how religion's connection to membership of a community is tied together by the 'actual performance of worshipping' (Habermas 2011a: 61). As we saw in chapters one and two the connection between rites and community attachment was often stressed in Enlightenment discussions on Judaism. It arises in the often-made claim that Judaism's extensive set of ceremonies, rites, and visible symbols made the faith *particularistic* and 'opposed' to outsiders. In Habermas' work the link between rites and community appears as characteristic for religion in general and is not in principle a negative notion. It is used to explain both why religion is a

unique source of meaning and solidarity and why religious arguments are always in need of translation before being used in the political public sphere.

In a dialogue with Charles Taylor, Habermas explains the difference between secular and religious reasons by stating that a secular philosophical argument does not rely on belonging to a community, while a religious argument does:

By using any kind of religious reasons, you are implicitly appealing to membership in a corresponding religious community. Only if one is a member and can speak in the first person from within a particular religious tradition does one share a specific kind of experience on which religious convictions and reasons depend (2011a: 61).

The cognitive dimension of religion, its interpretation of a specific doctrine, its rules, and revealed truths, *depend* on socialization in a religious community and ultimately on the participation in the rites of such a community: ‘the most important experience [...] arises from participation in cultic practices, in the actual performance of worshipping in which no neo-Kantian or utilitarian has to participate in order to make a good Kantian or utilitarian argument’ (ibid). Habermas thus argues that practice – e.g. rites and ceremonies – precedes dogma, which is dependent on these daily forms of worship in a community (2010: 5).<sup>52</sup>

It is *because* religious convictions and religious reasons rely on experiences that are only shared by members of a specific community of believers, that they will always need translation:

For all of the world religions associate with ritual practices their own epistemic paths to the sacred, be it revelation, meditation and ascetic exercise, or prayer. These particularistic ties explain the need, in the context of the political will-formation of a pluralistic society, to test the generalizable content of religious assertions independently of their epistemic context of origin (Habermas 2013: 655).

These ‘particularistic ties’ thus add another dimension to Habermas’ perception of religious belief as discursively impermeable. The ‘opaque core’ of religious experience which remains resistant to philosophical reflection does so, not only because it contains dogmatic truth claims that cannot be compromised, but because these truth claims only make sense to members of a religious community:

<sup>52</sup> **The complex relationship between ritual and myth is one of the core themes of Habermas’ most recent Two-thousand-page work** *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie. Band 1: Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben*

*and Wissen; Band 2: Vernünftige Freiheit: Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen* (2019).

'Evidence for religious reasons' in Habermas' perception 'does not only depend on cognitive beliefs and their semantic nexus with other beliefs but on existential beliefs that are rooted in social dimension of membership, socialization and prescribed practices' (2011a: 62).

Religion's specificity, in Habermas' most recent writings, lies in 'its anchor in the sacred complex combining a specific interpretation of man in the world with the practice of communal worship' (2013: 655). All religions appeal to this 'thick experience of membership in a religious community' (ibid: 653). This makes religions, even those hoping to be all-inclusive, ultimately particularistic:

Whereas rational morality and rational law sketch a formal standpoint of an inclusive "we" that obliges all parties equally to engage in mutual perspective-taking without prejudicing the outcome, a dogmatically fixed religious standpoint only permits the incorporation of assimilated others into the perspective of one's own religious community (ibid: 653).

While this particularism adds to Habermas' argument for excluding religion from political decision-making processes where 'mutual perspective taking' and neutrality towards different world views are essential, it also plays a role in Habermas' understanding of religion as a source of meaning, identity, and social solidarity. As discussed in the introduction, the explanations Habermas gives for the use of religious reasons in the public sphere go beyond the point that the exclusion of religious citizens would be procedurally unfair. There are, says Habermas, also functional reasons to not 'over-hastily reduce the polyphonic complexity of public voices' for 'religions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions' (2006: 10). Religion's connection to ritual practice is particularly important in this regard. Because rituals give rise to 'shared symbolic meaning' and 'reciprocal relations', the members of religious communities can lay claim to a privilege: 'Religious communities, in performing their cults, have preserved the access to an experience and to a source of solidarity from which the unbelieving sons and daughters of modernity are excluded' (Habermas 2011b). It is for this reason Habermas wants to 'preserve the authentic character of religious speech in the public sphere' as he is 'convinced that there might well be buried moral intuitions on the part of a secular public that can be uncovered by a moving religious speech' (Habermas 2011a: 65). By disallowing religious arguments in politics, secular societies would thus cut themselves off from a valuable resource; a resource that stems from its unique ritualistic nature: 'ritual has been a source of societal solidarity for which the enlightened morality of equal respect for all does not provide a real, motivational equivalent' (Habermas 2010b).

In the next section I shall look further into Habermas' ambivalent view of religion as something that must be both contained and preserved. It will become clear that his theory 'constructs' religion in a way that privileges a specific form of 'world religion', exhibiting a specific form of self-reflexivity. In discussing Habermas' account of what a legitimate religious speaker would look like I will critically engage with the genealogical argument that is part of his work on post-secularism.

### **Religion: Legitimate Speakers**

Maria Birnbaum argues that 'there is a distinctive productive power in Habermas' argument for the recognition of religion (2015: 182). Habermas "makes" religion through arguing for its recognition' (ibid). As we saw above, Habermas indeed constructs religion in a specific way by implicitly connecting religious belief to dogmatic truth claims, inviolability, authoritarianism, and particularism. The construction Birnbaum analyses, however, is that of 'legitimate religion'. In Habermas' postsecular theory, she asks, what does a valid religious speaker look like? What type of religion does Habermas 'envision entering the public sphere?' (ibid). In the next part of this chapter I aim to not only answer that question but to also discuss the forms of religion and the particular religious traditions that fall *outside* the scope of legitimacy. For doing so it is necessary to look deeper into Habermas' description of the *learning processes* both religious and non-religious citizens in a post-secular society should undergo.

### ***Reflexivity***

In a post-secular society, Habermas argues, secular citizens should become post-metaphysically aware. This not only means that they should refrain from passing judgments on religious truths, but also that they are willing to learn from religion. They also need to 'open their minds to the possible truth content' of religion and in that way become 'epistemically adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities' (Habermas 2006: 15). Religious citizens need to undergo a different, complementary learning process, in which they adjust to the cognitive dissonances that confront them in modern societies. In a process of 'hermeneutic self-reflection' religious citizens need to:

- 1) develop an epistemic attitude toward other religions and world views that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion. They succeed to the degree that they self-reflectively relate their religious beliefs to the statements of competing doctrines of salvation in such a way that they do not endanger their own exclusive claim to truth.
- 2) develop an epistemic stance toward the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts. They can only succeed if from their religious viewpoint they conceive the relationship of dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith.
- 3) develop an epistemic stance toward the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena. This can succeed only to the extent that they convincingly connect the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality with the premises of their comprehensive doctrines (ibid: 14).

Habermas' theory can thus be perceived, says Birnbaum, as 'selectively inclusive of those perspectives that correspond with his preexisting model of a liberal deliberative democracy' (2015: 189).

Habermas emphasizes that the mentalities described above cannot be legally enforced but must be developed from 'within comprehensive doctrines' (2006: 14). He further adds that the concept of 'learning process' can lead to misunderstandings. Only religious believers can decide 'whether their "modernized" faith is still the "true" faith' (ibid: 19); political theorists should not impose an evolutionary notion of religious progress, which describes non-reflexive forms of faith as 'cognitively backward' (ibid). These mentalities instead are presented by Habermas as 'functionally requisite' for political

deliberation in a post-secular society. However, the foregoing section makes it clear that Habermas does not consider these changes in epistemic attitudes a mere requirement sufficient for successful deliberation; as he writes in *Faith and Knowledge*: ‘without this trust of reflection, monotheism in relentlessly modernized societies unleashes a destructive potential’ (2005: 329). It is this assumption that *when* religion is not reflexive, in the Habermasian sense, it can be linked to ‘(fanatical) truth possession’ and should therefore be seen as ‘a source of potential political violence against those who do not possess the truth’ that is criticized by Jansen (2011b: 991-992). The assumption leaves little room for subjectivities that are not self-reflexive in the manner described by Habermas, but pose no threat to liberal democracy. Habermas’ thought seems to leave room for only two types of ‘religious consciousness’:

[O]n the one hand, a fundamentalism that either withdraws from the modern world or turns aggressively toward it; on the other, a reflective faith that relates itself to other religions and respects the fallible insights of the institutionalized sciences as well as human rights (Habermas 2010b).

Several authors have pointed out that Habermas’ political theory contains a dichotomy that does not do justice to empirical reality. By dividing believers into liberal reflexive actors and fundamentalists Habermas ‘is blind to the multivocality of religious traditions’ (Stoeckl 2017: 43). Christina Stoeckl argues that he ‘leaves the wide field of non-liberal religious actors undifferentiated and underexplored’ (ibid: 38). She introduces the category of the ‘traditionalist religious actor’ to complicate Habermas’ binary opposition and describes the complex ways these religious citizens engage with the epistemic shifts described above. Even though traditionalists are not (fully) reflexive they do not disengage from the modern world nor aim to overturn it by means of violence (ibid: 37). Both Matt Sheedy (2018) and Michiel Leezenberg (2010) critically examine Habermas’ ‘modernization/fundamentalism binary’ by exploring how it plays out in his treatment of Islam (Sheedy 2018: 338). Both authors question the construal of fundamentalism as an essentially premodern or anti-modern phenomenon (Leezenberg 2010: 94; Sheedy 2018: 338). Underlying this idea is, according to Leezenberg, ‘a modernization-theoretical assumption of linear temporality’ (Leezenberg 2010: 96). This idea of linear temporality becomes apparent when looking at Habermas’ account of the shared genealogy of religion and secular thought.

### *The genealogy of reason and religion*

As discussed above, Habermas wants to allow religious arguments in the public sphere not only for reasons of equal inclusion but also because religions 'preserve intact something that has been lost elsewhere' (2008b: 110). He seems to imply that 'religion can sometimes communicate meanings in a way that philosophy cannot' (Chambers 2007: 211), and presents religion as a source of resistance against the unbridled instrumentalizing forces of capitalism and dogmatic naturalism, and as a 'source of renewal and inspiration for secular philosophy' (ibid: 215). It is religion's ability to carry and communicate moral meaning 'especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life', that makes Habermas urge secular citizens to open up their minds to religious arguments (Habermas 2006: 10). Within this strand of the argument Birnbaum locates another element of Habermas' construal of the legitimate public speaker; by emphasizing religion's ancient roots he develops a conservative idea about what type of religion can contribute valuable moral insights (Birnbaum 2015: 189).

When describing the way secular citizens in a post-secular society should understand the continued existence of religious communities, Habermas emphasizes they should not perceive them as 'archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present', as a species threatened with extinction that should be preserved (2006: 15). However, Birnbaum shows that Habermas' own discourse on religious traditions as vehicles of moral knowledge sometimes comes close to such a vision, for example, when he argues that religion's 'unexhausted semantic potential [that] can be found only in traditions which [...] have not yet completely dissolved in the relentless acceleration of modern conditions of life' (Habermas 2010a: 77-78).

The exposition of this conservative notion of religion and religious reason is also prevalent in Habermas' most recent writings in which, as discussed above, he explains that religion's specificity lies in community membership and shared practices. What makes religion, and thereby religious reason, unique is:

[S]ocialization in a community of one of the four or five great world religions which can be traced back to the historic person of a founder or, more generally, to historical origins. These traditions that have been continued through the persistent interpretation of a specific doctrine (Habermas 2011a: 62).

Habermas opposes this type of faith, which is 'anchored in the life of a congregation', to 'new, deinstitutionalized forms of a fickle religiosity that

has withdrawn entirely into the subjective' (2010b). The distinct picture Habermas portrays shows that for religion to be of value it should both be institutionalized and show consistency. In Habermas' thought, Birnbaum declares, religion 'acceptable to public discourse, has ancient roots', and 'can deliver intact knowledge from these roots' (Birnbaum 2015: 190). These characteristics Habermas finds in the 'world religions' which have roots dating back to the first millennium before Christ, in what Karl Jaspers calls the Axial Age. These religious traditions, Habermas argues, are an integral part of the genealogy of reason itself.

Habermas puts forward this genealogical argument to 'problematize the overly confident secularistic self-understanding of modernity' (Allen 2016: 245). He aims to bring about a shift of perspective in the way post-metaphysical thought approaches religion by emphasizing the shared origin of philosophical *and* religious worldviews in the Axial Age. This period was characterized by a cognitive advance making it possible to adopt a 'view of the world as a whole from a transcendent point of view' (Habermas 2010a: 17). By introducing the Axial Age as the source from which both reason and religion emerged as 'complementary intellectual formations' (ibid: 18), he aims to counter both reason's secularistic understanding of itself and to provide it with a more global origin story. Habermas uses the Axial Age thesis as an alternative for countering the idea that reason is an exclusively secular product of the European Enlightenment.

Whether Habermas has fully accomplished this aim or not can be doubted. Many have argued that Habermas' own genealogy of reason remains Eurocentric, and this is especially apparent when looking at his historical account of the emergence of post-metaphysical reason and the processes leading to religion becoming more reflexive (see for example Allen 2016; Leezenberg 2010; Sheedy 2017).<sup>53</sup> The transcendent conception of reason that was part of the philosophical worldviews that developed during the Axial period, Habermas argues, was de-transcendentalized in early modernity. Modern science compelled 'philosophical reason [...] to break with metaphysical constructions of the totality of nature and history' (2010a: 16). A similar 'change in the form of religious consciousness' has taken place 'since the Reformation and Enlightenment' (Habermas 2006: 13). Post-metaphysical

<sup>53</sup> Some authors, such as Dafydd Huw Rees, argue the Axial Age hypothesis itself does not truly overcome Eurocentrism. Karl Jaspers' hypothesis, on which Habermas builds, excludes the peoples and religions that do not share in the axial heritage from the genealogy of reason: 'The axial

age hypothesis may not be Eurocentric in the traditional sense. But even if we count it as merely "Eurasia-centric" it still excludes most of the non-Western world from the cognitive and ethical history of the human race' (Hees 2017: 224).

reason and reflexive religion are thus presented as the products of a 'further cognitive push' that took place in early modern Europe (Habermas 2010b).

Amy Allen argues that this genealogy of post-metaphysical reason contains a strong 'vindicatory current', despite its critical intention of questioning secular reason's self-understanding (2016: 246). This is because Habermas understands and presents reason's historical development as a *learning process*. Despite Habermas' claim of his not imposing an evolutionary model of religious progress Allen states that: 'Inasmuch as Habermas assumes that we ought to understand our history as a learning process, he seems to require us to see our present, secular form of life as a developmental advance over a prior religious form of life' (ibid: 247). It is 'through this learning process, a prior religious heritage has been assimilated and transposed into a secular, enlightened, humanist language and form of life' (ibid: 246-247). This aspect of Habermas' genealogy becomes even more pronounced when looking at the role he gives to specific religious traditions in the historical development of post-secular reason.

### ***Judeo-Christianity and Islam***

In order for a religious believer to successfully participate in a liberal democracy 'or even for not forming [an] inherent threat' to it, she must become self-reflective (Jansen 2011b: 989). Furthermore, she must be a member of a specific kind of religious group – one with a long and consistent history, upholding community practices – to contribute valuable 'resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities' and to 'articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions' (Habermas 2008a: 29). Here I will trace how Habermas singles out Judaism and Christianity as those religious traditions that most successfully demonstrate both the historical development of religion *becoming reflexive* and religion's influence in the development of secular reason. For these reasons Habermas' perspective becomes vulnerable to critiques of euro-centrism and of more or less obviously excluding Islam and other religious or cultural traditions of non-European origin (Hees 2017; Jansen 2011; Leezenberg 2010; Sheedy 2018).

Habermas argues that all the world religions 'belong to the history of reason itself' (2008b: 6) by having contributed content and principles to secular philosophy. Philosophy has learned from its encounters with religious traditions, incorporating their content by 'liberating it from its dogmatic encapsulation' (Habermas 2006: 17). Habermas explicitly acknowledges that 'Muslim traditions' in their encounters with philosophy have, like other traditions, been a source of 'innovative stimulation' (2006: 17). However, when discussing the contributions of religious traditions in more detail, Christian and Jewish influences gain Habermas' continual focus. Autonomy,

individuality, emancipation, and solidarity are examples of concepts central to secular philosophy, all ‘shot through with meanings of a Judeo-Christian origin’ (ibid). The most explicit formulation of the deep-reaching influence of Jewish and Christian religion can be found in *Religion and Rationality*:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical re-appropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day, there is no alternative to it (Habermas 2002: 148-149).

Not only does this again demonstrate that Habermas – claiming the Jewish and Christian legacies are ‘substantially unchanged’ – has a very static notion of religious traditions, it also connects the entire system of liberal values to two specific religions. Reading the quotation one can but wonder in what way the other ‘world religions’ relate to these principles now solidly founded in a Judeo-Christian past. Not insignificantly, Habermas also fails to address the problematics surrounding the term ‘Judeo-Christian’. He in fact continues the term’s supersessionist use by the merging of Judaism and Christian ethics into the ‘Christianity’ which is described as the catalyst of modernity. Moreover, as we saw in the first two chapters, Enlightenment scholars often considered the ideals mentioned – autonomy, freedom, solidarity – as being in direct opposition to Judaism. This aspect of the history of these liberal-egalitarian values and principles disappears from Habermas’ genealogy of reason.

If we change our focus to Habermas’ discussion of the changes in mentality that he describes as the ‘modernization of religious consciousness’ (2006: 13), we see a similar use of European ‘Judeo-Christian’ history as the prime example of such a successful epistemic adjustment process. Since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, religious traditions in the West have become self-reflexive in response to the challenge of ‘pluralism, the emergence of modern science, and the spread of both positive law and profane morality’ (ibid: 13). Reflexivity is the result of learning processes which Judaism and Christianity appear to have fully completed:

Judaism and Christianity, which not only shaped Western culture but also played an important role in the genealogy of the idea of equality, no longer have any fundamental difficulties with the egalitarian structure and the individualistic character of a liberal order (Habermas 2008b: 305).

Islam, however, is presented as a religion that still has to undergo this shift from a more traditional to a more reflexive mentality:

Many Muslim communities still have this painful learning process before them. Certainly, the insight is also growing in the Islamic world that today an historical-hermeneutic approach to the Koran's doctrine is required. But the discussion on a desired Euro-Islam makes us once more aware of the fact that it is the religious communities that will themselves decide whether they can recognize in a reformed faith their "true faith" (Habermas 2008a: 27-28).

Habermas thus argues that Islam should undergo a learning process that is analogous to the 'model of the post-Reformation change in epistemic attitudes that took place in the Christian communities of the West' (ibid: 28).

Habermas' genealogy of post-secular reason and his discussion of Islam thus center around the 'very particular—if not unique—experience of the modernization of Western Europe' (Leezenberg 2010: 91). It therefore incorporates the modernist and secularist assumptions it aimed to overcome. Leezenberg introduces empirical examples from the contemporary Muslim world to counter the dichotomies – religious-secular, modern-fundamentalist – central to Habermas' thought:

Present-day forms of politicized religion in the Middle East have complex histories that cannot simply be qualified as a narrative of secularism followed by a post-secular condition, and equally resist reduction to an outdated master narrative of unenlightened pre-modern stagnation or failed Modernization (Leezenberg 2010: 106).

Jansen also critiques Habermas' treatment of Islam. Like Leezenberg she argues that imposing a European Reformatory model reveals a strongly Eurocentric perspective, containing a particular theory of religious progress. It further reveals a lack of knowledge about reformatory and secularizing movements within the Muslim world. Furthermore, it shows that Habermas 'can only distinguish between objectifying, historicizing ways of reading and fundamentalist ones' (Jansen 2011: 984) and has not taken into account alternative religious subjectivities such as those described by Mahmood and Stoeckl. As discussed above Habermas makes a direct connection between non-reflexive religion, claims of absolute truth, and religious authoritarianism. In the binary he establishes religion is either fully reflexive or associated with fanatical truth claims. As he identifies Islam with non-reflexivity the religion *as a whole* becomes portrayed as an inherent threat to liberal democracy.

Habermas positions himself as a critic of Kant who, he argues, treated 'religion both as heritage and opponent' [...] 'as the source of morality that satisfies the standards of reason' on the one hand, and 'as an obscure refuge to be cleansed of obscurantism and zealotry by philosophy' on the other (2008b: 227). Even though Habermas denies that philosophy can decide on matters of religious truth, this chapter has demonstrated that he ends up with an account quite similar to this Kantian position.

My analysis of Habermas' works aims to show that contemporary political philosophy on religion's public presence has insufficiently unpacked certain Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of religion and the characteristics that make it into a particular problem for the liberal state. It further demonstrates that these inheritances also include ideas about specific religious traditions. In chapter two I discussed how Kant developed his account of reason, freedom, and autonomy in direct opposition to heteronomy, a characteristic he applied most vehemently to the religions, races, and peoples of the East. In the idea that religion, as a set of revelatory truths, exercises dogmatic authority over the believer we see a similar linkage between religion and subjection or obedience to 'truths' that remain unquestioned. As Habermas locates the historical learning processes through which certain religions have become reflexive firmly within European modernity, non-European traditions are automatically thought to hold fanatical claims to truth and are represented as unable to formulate inclusive standpoints that engage with the perspectives of others. They are thus represented as necessarily in opposition to the 'egalitarian individualism and universalism' of secular morality. The Habermasian genealogy of secular and religious thought contributes to the perceived inability of Islam 'to peacefully exist within and alongside secular political values' (Wilson and Mavelli 2017: 4). Such questioning of Islam's compatibility with European values, defined as secular, liberal-democratic, or Judeo-Christian, has moved into the political mainstream in many European states. It is therefore particularly urgent to critically examine the persistence of the ideas about religious danger and the representations of Islam that form part of the history of liberal thought.

### Conclusion

Habermas' work on the place of religious arguments in the political public sphere reveals his ambivalent views towards religion. Religion is singled out as a unique source of meaning and solidarity, but also as presenting a unique problem for democratic cooperation. Religious arguments should be kept out of formal institutions because religion has a set of characteristics that make it unsuitable for deliberation. I have shown that in explaining why religion is always in need of translation Habermas attributes religious worldviews with a range of problematic characteristics. Religion, he argues, consists of a discursively impenetrable core of dogmatic truth claims which exercise authority over the believer. Religion is also ascribed a totalizing trait: it

penetrates every aspect of life. Furthermore, religious truth claims only make sense to members of a religious community as they ultimately depend on the practice of daily worship which lay at the foundations of such communities. Religious convictions are thus presented as sources of conflict or even of violence. Allowing untranslated religious arguments into the democratic process would transform peaceful deliberation into struggle; it would release a destructive potential into the political community.

I have further analyzed how Habermas characterizes the legitimate religious speaker that is able to successfully contribute to political decision making. Here it becomes apparent that Habermas thinks of religious citizens either as fully reflexive or associated with fundamentalist truth claims that pose a threat to the political order. In his historical reconstruction of the emergence of post-secular reason it becomes clear that he associates this form of reflexivity with Judaism and Christianity, and considers reflexivity to be the outcome of processes of Reformation and Enlightenment that took place in European Early Modernity. In his discussions of Islam Habermas argues that this religion has yet to undergo an analogous learning process. These discussions not only show that Habermas imposes an evolutionary model of religious progress, derived from a unique European historical experience, it also implies that he considers Islam to be a tradition that has not yet become reflexive. Because of the stark dichotomy that considers religion to be either fully reflexive or fundamentalist, Islam is thus portrayed as the latter.

The incidence of these unscientific assumptions in one of political philosophy's most influential contributors to debates about religion's public presence is particularly illustrative as Habermas is aware of the entangled history of religious and secular thought, and aims to use this history to question the idea that religious citizens are fundamentally different. Even so, his work singles out religion as a unique phenomenon which presents the liberal-democratic state with singular challenges. This idea of religion as a special source of societal conflict is not exclusive to the work of Habermas but is a fundamental part of the tradition of (political) liberalism. In what follows I will look further into the ways in which ideas concerning problematic and dangerous forms of religiosity are part of contemporary political theory on state-religion relationships in the work of so-called 'liberal egalitarians'. These liberal egalitarian approaches to religious freedom differ from those of Habermas in that they do not single out religion as uniquely special. Instead they analogize religion with other convictions, doctrines, or views of the 'good life'. As these scholars do not engage with the concept of 'religion' directly, their assumptions about the nature of religion, and ideas about its dangerous dimensions, are formulated in a less overt manner. In the next chapter I specifically analyze the work of John Rawls, and that of Charles Taylor and Jocelyne Maclure, who have been the pivotal thinkers in this field.

# Chapter 5

## Egalitarian Theories of Religious Freedom and the Black Box of Religion\*

Many contemporary political theorists writing about religious freedom argue that in pluralist societies, religious convictions should not be treated as uniquely special (See for example Dworkin 2013; Leiter, 2012; Schwartzman 2012). Cécile Laborde calls these thinkers ‘egalitarian theorists of religious freedom’ (Laborde 2014a: 5). The particular approach of this strain of thinking can be contrasted with another form of thought in which religious freedom is a special freedom, or even the *first* liberty of the liberal state, because religion *is* seen as distinctive and irreducible to a broader category, ‘as it serves to protect a uniquely special human good’ (ibid).

\* This chapter is based on Blijdenstein, A. 2015. *Egalitarian Theories of Religious Freedom and the Black Box of Religion*. In Bardon, A., Lee, L., Birnbaum, M. and Stoeckl, K. (Eds.). *Religious*

*Pluralism: A Resource Book*. European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, ReligioWest, 76-82.

Egalitarian theories of religious freedom describe a family of views that hold that religious freedom is not a distinctive freedom and that it should be treated under a more general equality-based regime. The special and unique place of religion is indefensible in light of the ideal of equality between citizens. Religious beliefs and activities might be *especially* protected, but not *uniquely* so: if and when they are, it is as a subset of a broader category of respect-worthy beliefs and activities (ibid).

According to egalitarian theories, the liberal state should endorse a stance of neutrality toward religious and nonreligious citizens. When discussing questions of free exercise and establishment liberal egalitarians do not solely focus on religion and religious beliefs. The category of what is protected by religious freedom is extended by *analogizing* or comparing religion with other beliefs, commitments, and identities. Ronald Dworkin, for example, claims that the liberal state should not just protect religion but ‘ethical independence in foundational matters’; therefore the state must never make the assumption that ‘one way for people to live their lives’ is intrinsically better than others (2013: 150).

In this chapter I will discuss two egalitarian theories of religious freedom: first I will discuss some of the influential ideas John Rawls puts forward in *Political Liberalism* (2005), a book that, since its publication in 1993, has provided a dominant framework and vocabulary for discussing the relationship between religion and politics, influencing both political theory and legal thought on religious freedom, the nature of the secular state, and the possibility of ‘accommodating’ religious and moral diversity in modern liberal democracies. Next, I will analyze Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor’s book *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (2011). Maclure and Taylor commence from a Rawlsian starting-point but criticize his chosen analogy of religion with ‘comprehensive doctrines’. They claim all ‘convictions of conscience’ merit special protection.

While Laborde defends the necessity of developing egalitarian theories, she rightly states that the analogies chosen by both Rawls and Maclure/Taylor demonstrate that these theorists ‘underestimate the communal, cultural dimensions of religion itself and betray an (unexpected) Protestant bias in the interpretation of where the good of religion is located’ (Laborde 2012), an argument which could also be made for Rawls’ conception of religion as a comprehensive doctrine. In the second part of the chapter I briefly discuss Laborde’s critique and build upon it to show that both theories in fact contain several different ideas about the nature of religion. These assumptions, which are rarely made explicit, are not only found in the theories’ general definitions

and descriptions of religion, but also in discussions of specific religions and religious believers. Some of these representations rely on implicit theological assumptions, whilst others are related to a historically specific construction of religious conflict.

Even in the work of these authors who claim not to single out religion one encounters legacies of the Enlightenment representations of religion discussed in the first two chapters. These can be traced in the author's ideas about religion's dangerous and problematic dimensions as well as in their characterizations of specific religions. Such implicit assumptions on the nature of religion not only inform political theory's normative standpoints on religious freedom and the accommodation of religious minorities, but may also have a wider influence on societal debates on religion, and its place in society; making these ideas explicit opens up the possibility of their contestation.

This chapter proceeds by outlining the particular ways in which these authors construe religion, namely, as a matter of conscience and as a comprehensive doctrine. These characterizations lead the authors to overestimate the likelihood of inter-religious diversity and division, and underestimate the possibility for intra-religious heterogeneity and conflict. It goes on to show how focusing on the Reformation and the so-called wars of religion means that their accounts of religious and moral pluralism are modeled on a historically specific construction of religion as a special source of conflict.

## **Two Egalitarian Theories of Religious Freedom**

### ***Rawls***

In *Political Liberalism* Rawls proposes an answer to the question of how a society of free and equal citizens, divided by incompatible ideas of the good, can be just and stable. He first discusses which notion of justice is right for a society characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism. Next, he tries to show that a society, whose basic institutions and laws are founded on this notion of justice, is stable for the right reasons: its principles of justice can be freely accepted by citizens who support different moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines.

*Political Liberalism* assumes there are many reasonable comprehensive doctrines with different views of the good (2005: 135). In a liberal democracy people with different and conflicting views enter into a cooperative relationship inside a structure of political and economic institutions and share political power. That power is imposed on individual citizens who might not agree with certain laws or with the way the institutional structure is justified. The government has the authority to uphold the constitution with sanctions and the potential use of violence. This leads to the question of political legitimacy.

According to Rawls, political power is legitimate only when it is applied according to a constitution the essentials of which can be reasonably endorsed by citizens – seen as free and equal, ‘in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason’ (2005: 135). The exercise of political power should meet the criterion of *reciprocity*: citizens should be able to reasonably believe that all citizens can endorse fundamental laws and institutions voluntarily. Rawls presents his idea of political justice as a solution to the problem of political legitimacy; he argues that his account of justice meets the criterion of reciprocity. Consensus on his political principles is possible because his theory is both *limited in scope* and *freestanding*. First, Rawls’ theory of justice is applicable to a specific subject: the basic institutional structure of society; it speaks of ‘a society’s main political, social, and economic institutions, and how they fit together into one unified system of social cooperation’ (ibid: 11). His theory of justice, therefore, is a political account and not a general ethical conception. Secondly, the political account of justice is a freestanding conception: it is a moral view which is not part of a specific philosophical, religious or epistemological doctrine and does not – according to Rawls – depend on metaphysical claims about the nature of persons. It is a view based on political ideals which are independent of the many different ideas of the good life prevailing in democratic society; it ‘deliberately stays on the surface, philosophically speaking’ (Rawls 1985: 230).

Rawls contrasts his political account of justice with ‘comprehensive doctrines’ which citizens in a democratic society adhere to. Whereas Rawls’ account of justice has a clear subject – the basic structure of society – religious and philosophical doctrines aspire to be both general and comprehensive:

A moral conception is general if it applies to a wide range of subjects and in the limit to all subjects universally. It is comprehensive when it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole (Rawls 2005: 13).

Rawls’ political theory aims to be impartial towards reasonable comprehensive doctrines – those that can endorse his political account of justice. It puts forward principles of justice that can reasonably be accepted by all. Basic laws and institutions that are based on Rawls’ political principles of justice can therefore never do anything intended to ‘favor or promote any particular comprehensive doctrine rather than another’ (ibid: 193). The impartiality is further enhanced by the fact that his account of justice ‘does not attack or

criticize' reasonable views, much less reject any particular theory of the truth of moral judgments. Deciding which moral judgments are true is not a matter for political liberalism.

### ***Maclure and Taylor***

In Maclure and Taylor's *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (2011) the Rawlsian aim of impartiality toward 'the plurality of philosophical, religious and moral perspectives adopted by citizens' (2011: 2) is presented as the main objective of the secular state. Like Rawls the authors believe an overlapping consensus on political principles is possible and can lead to a form of harmonious coexistence between people with different 'conceptions of the world and of the good' (ibid).

Maclure and Taylor – who wrote their book within the context of Canadian debates on reasonable accommodation – begin by claiming that a neutral state, protecting the principle of non-discrimination, should grant minorities the same opportunities to enjoy and practice their religion as majorities. They then discuss on what grounds, (or in virtue of what grounds), *religious* beliefs are worthy of special consideration, and in which way they differ from mere preferences or desires. Religious beliefs, according to Maclure and Taylor, are part of a broader range of convictions, beliefs, and commitments that form a particular type of subjective preference in need of special legal protection. These are what they call *convictions of conscience* (ibid: 73). People have certain 'core' or 'meaning-giving' convictions and commitments that can be distinguished from other personal beliefs and preferences 'because of the role they play in an individual's moral identity' (ibid: 76). Core beliefs allow people to exercise their faculty of judgment and guide them in a 'plural moral space' in which they have to choose between competing values and life plans, thereby giving both meaning and direction. When a person is able to act according to what she perceives to be her core convictions, she can act with 'moral integrity' (ibid). Not granting a person the freedom to do so constitutes a moral injury.

Maclure and Taylor emphasize that their category of 'core convictions' or 'convictions of conscience' contains both secular and religious beliefs. Departing from Rawls' theory they explicitly state that these beliefs and commitments need not be comprehensive. Rawls' theory, they argue, creates a hierarchy between 'convictions stemming from established secular or religious doctrines and [...] values that do not originate in any totalizing system of thought' (ibid: 93). Maclure and Taylor put forward the examples of vegetarianism, and the commitment to take care of a terminally ill loved one, to show that many core convictions that do not fit the Rawlsian mold nevertheless play a fundamental role in people's lives. Forcing a vegetarian to eat meat, or preventing a person from taking care

of a severely ill partner, constitutes a ‘restriction of conscience’ and should be seen as a moral harm. Many people, Maclure and Taylor claim, ‘do not refer to a general and comprehensive doctrine in their judgments and conduct of their lives’, while a temporary commitment of taking care of ‘an ailing loved one is for some people an experience charged with meaning, one that leads them to face their own finitude, reassess values and commitments’ (ibid 93), and therefore being a constituent part of a person’s moral identity.

### ***Defining Religion***

Laborde argues that the strategy of comparing or analogizing religion with other beliefs, identities, or commitments, developed as an answer to the many critiques of religion depicting it as a thoroughly Western imperial construct (see for example Masusawa 2005), or as a construct that has served, and is deeply entangled with, a Western idea of secularism, and entrenched in a distinctive Protestant anthropology (see for example Asad 1993; 2003). Egalitarian theorists of religious freedom want to purge their philosophies of these faults by getting rid of the concept of religion altogether:

They suggest that, even though historically the liberal state may have defined itself in relation to a problematic construal of religion, it has since broadened the scope of its moral concern, and is therefore less vulnerable to charges of ethnocentrism (Laborde 2014b).

Maclure and Taylor seem to argue in this manner when they defend their *subjective conception* of religious freedom. In their account, the special status of religious belief is derived from the role these beliefs play in people’s lives, ‘rather than from assessment of their intrinsic validity’, or from them being grounded in ‘official religious dogma’ (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 81-82). In appeals for accommodation claimants should not be obliged to show an objective religious obligation, and states or courts should not have to interpret religious dogma in order to judge in such cases. A personal or subjective account of religious freedom prioritizes an individual’s moral autonomy and at the same time offers a solution to an important problem: ‘it allows the courts to circumvent the perhaps insoluble problem of defining what a religion is’ (ibid: 84). By trying to separate the content of religious and philosophical or moral doctrines from his political theory of justice, Rawls also avoids having to explicitly define what religion is. The content of comprehensive doctrine is – as long as it is reasonable – of little interest to his political theory. ‘I make a point in *Political Liberalism*’ he states, ‘of really not discussing anything, as far as I can help it, that will put me at odds with a theologian’ (1999b: 622).<sup>54</sup>

However, to Laborde, analogizing religion with conceptions of the good, of comprehensive doctrines, or convictions of conscience, is not a satisfactory response to aforementioned critiques. By choice of analogy egalitarian theories can still be grounded in contested, historically specific, and possibly biased, conceptions of religion. In the next part of this chapter I will briefly discuss Laborde's critique which points out the emphasis on *conscience* present in the analogies used by both Rawls and Maclure/Taylor. I will extend her argument by showing that several different assumptions about the nature of religion permeate both theories.

### ***Religion as conscience***

Maclure and Taylor argue that the good of religion, that part of it that merits special consideration and protection, is situated in the idea that religious beliefs are 'convictions of conscience'. These 'core meaning-giving beliefs' are especially important because they structure people's existence, help them understand the world around them, and guide their moral judgments and conduct (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 13).

A similar role is ascribed to comprehensive doctrines when Rawls explains that religious, philosophical, or moral doctrines are part of an individual's conception of the good – of 'what is valuable in human life' (Rawls 2005: 19). A person's good consists of a scheme of final ends, of attachments and loyalties to people and associational relationships, but it also includes 'a view of our relation to the world – religious, philosophical, or moral – by reference to which the value and significance of our ends and attachments are understood' (Rawls 1985: 234). Moral judgments, according to Rawls, are always made 'from the point of view of some comprehensive moral doctrine. These doctrines render a judgment, all things considered: that is, taking into consideration what they see as relevant moral and political values and all relevant facts (as each doctrine determines)' (Rawls 2005: xx). Consequently, the role Rawls assigns to the individual's religion is closely related to the one Maclure and Taylor ascribe to conscientious convictions: it coordinates our moral decisions and helps us understand our aims and commitments. This similarity between the two theories is remarkable, for in the past Charles Taylor fiercely criticized Rawlsian liberalism by stating that it rests on an overly individualistic conception of the self. This current focus on individual conscience seems to be at odds with Taylor's earlier commitment to communitarian political theory (Taylor 1985; 1989).

<sup>54</sup> The idea that the content of comprehensive doctrines should, according to Rawls, be of no interest to the political theorist or to the state is difficult to reconcile with the requirement of reasonableness. This requirement suggests there

remains a focus on the *content* of people's beliefs. What a reasonable citizen is, is determined not primarily by their behavior but by the convictions they hold.

According to Laborde something is lost when re-describing freedom of religion as the freedom to live according to one's 'conscientious convictions' or 'comprehensive doctrine', claiming that many aspects of people's religious experience cannot simply be reinterpreted in such a manner. For numerous religious believers, she states, religion is about exhibiting virtues, living in community with others and 'shaping one's daily life in accordance with the rituals of the faith' (Laborde 2012). A practicing Catholic who goes to mass on Sunday, receives the sacrament of marriage, and has her children baptized and confirmed, will most likely find these activities meaning-giving, yet they are not necessarily duties of conscience. 'Maclure and Taylor tend to re-interpret acts of habitual, collective, "embodied practices" of religious devotion as Protestantized duties of conscience' (Laborde 2012; see also Laborde 2015: 590).

Not only does this emphasis on conscience favor a 'Protestant understanding of what a religion is' and ignore the interplay of religious, cultural, and ethnic affiliation, it also has the consequence of encouraging 'rigid interpretations of religious dogma' (Laborde 2012). People who claim that their religious beliefs and activities are conscientious convictions which cannot be compromised without harming their moral integrity are rewarded 'over and above those habitual believers who seek to accommodate their religious life to a secularizing world' (ibid). Only beliefs that are so intensely held that they are experienced as unconditional moral duties are considered candidates for special consideration and accommodation. Others have similarly emphasized the danger of freedom of conscience becoming a license for the refusal to compromise and to reconsider traditional viewpoints. This becomes especially problematic when being religious or leading a religious organization 'proves profitable', as the special protection of conscience can be used to justify any racist and anti-democratic points of view (Jansen 2017: 378).<sup>55</sup>

This point seems especially pertinent when reading Maclure and Taylor's defense of a subjective conception of religious freedom. Anticipating the critique of overlooking the ritual dimension of religion, they state that their account does not necessarily 'disadvantage religious experiences focused more on religious practices and rites':

[P]eople with strict or orthodox religious practices can base themselves on the subjective conception of freedom of religion to request accommodations, even if the religious authorities in their community do not agree on whether the religious practice in question is obligatory or optional (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 84).

<sup>55</sup> Jean Cohen analyses such dynamics in the U.S. and shows how freedom of conscience is used in the creation of exemptions from civil regulation and

anti-discrimination law for 'religious associations and the non- or for-profit corporations owned or controlled by the religious' (2015: 170).

Here Maclure and Taylor make a direct connection between the concept of practice and a strictness or orthodoxy. Their theory thus leaves little room for people who do not want to reinterpret their religious activities in this way. The same can be said about their discussion of religious dress, which they regard as an ‘externalization’ of convictions of conscience (ibid: 45). Maclure and Taylor further try to defuse the critique of a Protestant bias, by stating that their theory is simply in harmony with contemporary developments in most people’s common experience of their faith, ‘namely, the phenomenon of “individualization” or “Protestantization” and the growing importance of ‘the resonance of religious beliefs in one’s personal quest for meaning and purpose’ (ibid: 83).<sup>56</sup>

Laborde further points out that some discussions concerning the relationship between religion and the state are difficult to conduct using the analogies of religion put forward by Rawls and Maclure/Taylor. Questions of establishment and associational freedoms are hard to discuss in terms of ‘individual core convictions’. Issues relating to the tax exemptions of religious charities, and church autonomy in the appointment of leaders, cannot be described as conscientious practices, so it is hard to say if they would be entitled to accommodation (Laborde 2012).

One can question whether Laborde’s own account of religious freedom sufficiently takes into account the critiques she formulates here. In her rethinking of this principle she argues that what should be protected by the state is not *conscience* but what she calls ‘integrity-protecting commitments’ (IPCs), commitments ‘manifested in a practice, ritual, or action (or refusal to act), that allows an individual to live in accordance with how she thinks she ought to live’ (Laborde 2017: 203-204). This integrity view, she claims, does not assume the primacy of individual belief in the Protestant sense but can also accommodate practice-centered, embodied, and communal conceptions of religion (ibid: 205). However, it fails to fully convince that the notion of integrity solves the problems connected with a focus on conscience. Laborde explains integrity as being connected to Kymlicka’s ideal of living one’s life from the inside (ibid: 35). Integrity related liberties, she argues, are those liberties ‘essential to the exercise of citizens’ core moral powers: notably, their capacity to formulate and live by their own ethical commitments and projects’ (ibid: 147). The distinction between inside and outside, and her focus on individual ethics, shows that Laborde does not fully overcome the individualistic and belief-centered dimensions characteristic of Maclure and Taylor’s theory of religious freedom (see also Bonotti 2019). The question of

<sup>56</sup> The evolutionary assumption Maclure and Taylor put forward here is not unambiguously supported

by sociological evidence. For a critical overview see Bader 2011.

whether Laborde's account might still contain a Protestant bias becomes more pertinent when we look at the two different kind of IPCs she distinguishes.

All IPCs – religious and non-religious – are, according to Laborde, candidates for exemption. However, because Laborde agrees with Allen Patten that cultural attachments 'track at some distance, the importance of religious convictions' (Patten 2014: 168), she differentiates between 'two kinds of IPCs, with different ethical salience' namely obligation-IPCs and identity-IPCs (Laborde 2017: 215). While an obligation-IPC is a commitment a person feels obligated to act upon, identity-IPCs are 'non-obligation-imposing commitments and practices that comprehensively regulate the lives of the claimant' (ibid: 216). While both types of IPCs can be either religious or non-religious, Laborde states that in the case of a religious identity-IPC religion 'looks a lot like culture' (ibid). It is this type of commitment that is described by Mahmood who sees 'religious life as consisting of embodied practices of piety, exhibiting the virtues of fidelity, devotion, care of the self and others, and so on' (ibid). These types of commitments are ethically salient, Laborde argues, but they are not 'duties of conscience, or even obligations' (ibid).

Laborde claims 'that identity-IPCs are less salient than obligation-IPCs because the violation of integrity caused by restriction on culture is weaker and more indirect than that caused by coercing individuals not to act on their sense of obligation' (ibid: 210). I would argue that her account obligation-IPC remains closely connected with the notion of conscientious conviction as understood by Taylor and Maclure. As the salience of a particular commitment matters in judging the fairness of an exemption, the prioritization of obligation-IPCs means her account remains vulnerable to critiques of Protestant bias.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, her understanding of integrity does not solve the issue of encouraging 'rigid interpretations' of dogma. It remains attractive for individuals to interpret or present a particular commitment as a matter of obligation.

Returning to the analysis of Rawls and Maclure/Taylor it has become apparent, their different terminology notwithstanding, that these authors are equally collapsing religion into matters of conscience; and this is not the only similarity in their characterization of religion. In the following section I will argue that in both theories religion is portrayed as comprehensive in scope and as internally stable and homogeneous. These characteristics play a role in upholding the idea that religion is a special source of social conflict.

<sup>57</sup> Laborde is aware of the fact that in her account commitments that are part of non-Western religion will often be considered less ethically salient because they are not obligation-IPCs

insofar as these religions 'lack the attributes of divine command, strict separation between the profane and the sacred, a sacred text, and religious authorities' (2017: 216).

### *Religion as comprehensive*

As we saw above, Maclure and Taylor believe that by using the term ‘comprehensive doctrine’ John Rawls disregards the fact that many people do not base their life’s decisions on a wide-ranging and general doctrine. Some individuals might adopt a partially comprehensive doctrine by attempting to establish coherence in their values and commitments, but others – perhaps a majority, Maclure and Taylor believe – ‘refer to a fluid, eclectic set of values that are spelled out and linked to one another to a greater or lesser degree’ (2011: 94). A person appeals to values when making a decision but weighing competing values ‘occurs on an *ad hoc* basis’ (ibid).

This does not mean that Maclure and Taylor do not consider *religion* to be comprehensive. In fact, several passages in *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* suggest they do in fact believe religion to be all-encompassing and systemic. Comprehensiveness, however, is not the aspect of religion that makes it worthy of respect and protection in their view;<sup>58</sup> the fact that – like some secular beliefs and commitments – it produces intensely held convictions is (ibid: 97). By distinguishing between established ‘religious doctrines and other values that do not originate in any totalizing system of thought’ and convictions that ‘originate in a doctrine based on exegetical and apologetic texts’, and those that follow from an eclectic set of specific and (sometimes) temporary commitments and values, Maclure and Taylor present religion as an all-embracing system of values and convictions based on the dogma to be found in religious texts (ibid: 93). This conception of religion – as I will presently show – leads the authors to argue that religious believers have little room to maneuver when making life choices, and little opportunity to adapt their convictions over time.

John Rawls uses the concept of a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ when he speaks of religious and secular conceptions of the good. A conception may be fully comprehensive, Rawls contends, ‘if it covers all recognized values and virtues within one rather precisely articulated system’ (2005: 13). Although Rawls explicitly states that not all people adhere to a doctrine that is systemic and ‘all-inclusive’, he believes ‘there is a tendency for religious and philosophical conceptions to be general and fully comprehensive; indeed their being so is sometimes regarded as an ideal to be realized’ (ibid: 175). In this way, an ambition to being general and all-encompassing becomes a defining feature of religious and secular moral doctrines.

<sup>58</sup> Rawls would agree that what creates the need for protection is the importance doctrines play in people’s

lives, not the fact that they are comprehensive.

### ***Religion, univocality and conflict***

Another feature that Rawls and Taylor/Maclure take to be typical of religion is its internal homogeneity. Both in *Political Liberalism* and *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* it is stressed that in a modern liberal democracy individual value systems are incompatible. It is this circumstance of inevitable conflict between different conceptions of the good that leads Rawls to pose the question of political legitimacy in the first place, and search for an overlapping consensus on political principles that can provide stability. Maclure and Taylor argue that moral and religious pluralism ‘lies at the heart of the most profound and complex disagreements existing among citizens’ (2011: 10). The relationship between religious and non-religious people is, according to Maclure and Taylor, especially problematic and ‘often characterized by incomprehension, distrust, and sometimes even mutual intolerance’ (ibid: 106).

For Maclure and Taylor the idea that religions provide, or aim to provide, a systematic account of all virtues and values applying to all subjects, is directly related to the fact that they regard the presence of many different religions and secular doctrines as a source of conflict. The emphasis on system – in which all virtues and values are coherently positioned – leads the authors to focus solely on conflicts between diverging ‘totalizing systems of thought’, and not on possible conflicts within religious traditions, texts, or communities. The ‘doctrinal’ aspect of religion that is emphasized in both theories make religions seem rigid moral systems that are internally consistent, and thus leaving little room for doubt, uncertainty, or moral dilemmas:

People who refer [...] to a more fluid, eclectic set of values are not as likely to see their values as so many *obligations* or unconditional rules for action. Since the arbitration among values – professional success, family life, and social involvement, for example – not all of which can be realized fully and simultaneously, is permanent and structural reality in their lives, such people enjoy a much larger margin for maneuvering with respect to their convictions than those who rely on a comprehensive doctrine (whether an ecocentrist philosophy or a monotheist religion) (ibid: 94).

While Christians, Jews and Muslims apparently have access to a complete and fully coherent value system that helps them to balance their career and family life without losing any sleep over it, those that do not adhere to such a doctrine have to balance and weigh competing values on a daily basis. As a result, individuals who do not adhere to a comprehensive doctrine are more adept at adjusting their beliefs and values to changing circumstances.

A similar depiction of religion as a univocal source of values is put forward by John Rawls when he distinguishes between forms of intolerance that

stem from political principles and those that are rooted in religious creed. While denying someone's liberty on the basis of a political principle, such as public order, can be mistaken – e.g. when John Locke argues atheists should not be tolerated because they cannot be trusted to observe the bonds of civil society – intolerance that stems from *dogma* is much more problematic. This difference, according to Rawls, is more fundamental than the actual limits to toleration: 'For when the denial of liberty is based upon theological principles or matters of faith, no argument is possible' (Rawls 1971: 216).

For Rawls the idea that religion leaves little room for doubt and discussion and, for that reason, is therefore an important source of societal conflict, has less to do with the notion of comprehensiveness than with the idea that religious and non-religious doctrines contain an impenetrable transcendent element. This can be better understood when we look at the way he describes the historical origins of freedom of conscience, toleration, and neutrality of the state. Both Rawls and Maclure/Taylor consider the Reformation and the aftermath of religious wars as origins for the development of these principles that now characterize the secular state (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 22). For these authors the pluralism of religious and nonreligious doctrines in modern societies in some sense mirrors the conflicting Christian doctrines that developed during the Reformation. In the introduction to *Political Liberalism*, for example, Rawls discusses the historical developments that led to the contemporary reality of the pluralism of moral and religious doctrines. Christianity, and especially the Reformation, says Rawls, drastically changed the aims and nature of political and moral philosophy.

Rawls makes a comparison between the problems that were characteristic for the ancients and those that trouble the moderns. He claims that ancient religion was a civic religion 'of public social practice' and public celebration, and also emphasizes that the Greeks had no religion of salvation in the Christian sense, saying most importantly that: 'This religion contains no alternative idea of the highest good to set against that expressed by Homeric gods and heroes' (Rawls 2005: xii). Rawls states Early Roman Christianity had five characteristic features which civic religion lacks: (1.) it tended toward authoritarian religion: its authority institutionalized in the church and the papacy; (2.) it was a religion of salvation, with a way to eternal life and this required true belief as taught by the church; (3) hence it was a doctrinal religion with a creed that was to be believed; (4.) it was a religion of priests with sole authority to dispense means of grace; and finally, (5.) it was an expansionist religion of conversion (ibid: xxiii).

Turning to the modern period, Rawls argues that Christianity, especially the Reformation, drastically changed the aims and nature of political and moral philosophy. The Reformation produced enormous consequences, and led to the division of Christianity into many rival forms that retained many of the same features mentioned above (ibid: xxiii). During the wars of religion, after the Reformation, people were no longer ‘in doubt about the nature of the highest good, or the basis of moral obligation in divine law. These things they thought they knew with the certainty of faith, as here their moral theology gave them complete guidance’ (Rawls 2005: xxiv). This clash between Salvationist, creedal, and expansionist religions was not known to the ancients, but is, according to Rawls, a defining feature of modernity.

What is new about this clash is that it introduces into people’s conceptions of their good a transcendent element, not admitting of compromise. Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict (ibid: xxvi).

Political liberalism, Rawls argues, should embrace the fact of reasonable pluralism as ‘a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, including both religious and nonreligious doctrines’ (ibid: xxiv). The focus of modern political and moral philosophy therefore can no longer be the nature of the highest good. For the Moderns, states Rawls, the good is known in their religion or – in contemporary society – in their religious or non-religious comprehensive doctrines. This personal conception of the good, he continues, is characterized by a special inaccessibility that makes conflicts between different ideas of the good irreconcilable.

As we saw in the last chapter, the idea that all religions contain a certain core or essence that cannot be discussed, much less compromised over, is also present in the work of Habermas. Similar views can be found in the thought of other liberal philosophers, especially those critical of the use of religious arguments in political debates (see for example Audi 1993). This essentializing notion shows a disinterest in unpacking the concept of religion ‘into the different intellectual schools, theological struggles and internally contested teachings that make up a religion’ (Stoeckl 2014). Moreover, Rawls seems to fall prey to what Donald Lopez calls the ‘ideology of belief’, the assumption ‘that religion is above all an interior state of assent to certain truths’ (Lopez 1998: 31). While belief may be central to the way Christians have told their own history, Lopez resists the idea that religion in general can and should be defined as a ‘set of truth claims’ (ibid: 28). Belief, states Lopez, is not a universal or natural category, but a statement that is appropriate to a specific situation. It has historically functioned ‘as a means of establishing a community against “the world”’ (ibid: 33). In many historical and

contemporary religious conflicts the category of belief has functioned to obscure more material and political interests.

Rawls' historical reading of the wars of religion, which gives them a crucial place in the 'making of modernity', has therefore also been extensively criticized by Cavanaugh (2009: 150). Cavanaugh questions the historical reading of post-Reformation wars in Europe as being conflicts over doctrinal difference. He further points out how this reading contributed to the myth of religious violence, which served and continues to serve 'as a kind of creation myth for the modern state' (ibid: 10). Even without the critique of the characterizations of the wars of religion as wars about conflicting religious doctrine, one can wonder if the image of clashes between people, 'in no doubt about the nature of the highest good', best serves to describe our current pluralistic societies.

### Representation of Specific Religions: Rawls on Islam

Up to now I have argued that both Rawls' and Maclure/Taylor's egalitarian theories of religious freedom contain several contestable assumptions about the nature of religion. Egalitarian theorists, however, do not only write about religion in general but also discuss cases involving specific religious groups and traditions. Islam and the presence of Muslims in democratic Western societies are topics that are discussed particularly often. These debates contain descriptions of Islam that, again, are based on assumptions about the nature of Muslims and the nature their religion. To fully open the 'religious black box' (Stoeckl 2014) it is instructive to place such representations of specific religions alongside assumptions about religion in general to see how the two are interrelated.

In *On the Muslim Question* (2009) Anne Norton claims that Rawls' *The Law of Peoples* (1999a.) contains several contestable assumptions about the nature of Islam. In his book on just relations between the world's different peoples Rawls introduces a hypothetical and idealized Islamic country he calls Kazanistan; this has attracted little scholarly attention and 'the fact that the only concrete example described by Rawls is an Islamic country has not yet received full consideration' (Hatzenberger 2013: 107). Kazanistan is used to illustrate the point that liberal peoples can have just relations with non-liberal but decent peoples.<sup>59</sup> Norton suggests that Kazanistan's decency is ensured by its departure from what Rawls presents as 'the Muslim norm' (2009: 96).

<sup>59</sup> Liberal peoples, according to Rawls, are those societies that respect their citizens' comprehensive doctrines, while illiberal societies do not. Provided the institutions of illiberal societies meet certain

conditions of political right and justice, and provided they accept general principles regulating their behavior towards other states, these peoples are described as 'decent' (Rawls 1999a: 59-60; 62-78).

For example, when Rawls states that ‘unlike most Muslim rulers, the rulers of Kazanistan have not sought empire and territory’<sup>60</sup> and that this ‘is the result of “its theologians” interpreting jihad in a spiritual and moral sense, and not in military terms’ (Rawls 1999a: 76), he implies that regular Muslim leaders are ‘violent, warlike and imperialistic’ (Norton 2009: 98). The same could be said about his statement that Kazanistan is marked by an ‘enlightened treatment of the various non-Islamic religions and other minorities’ (Rawls 1999a: 76). This statement could be interpreted as saying that ‘normal’ Islamic people are not enlightened in this sense. He is after all describing an ‘idealized’ Islamic people. This leaves us, says Norton, with a very problematic description of Muslims as commonly violent, imperialistic, and discriminatory towards women and minority religions (2009: 96- 100).

Loubna el Amine points out that in his description of non-decent societies, Rawls relinquishes the institutionalism and focus on public political culture used to describe decent liberal societies: ‘his lens for viewing non-Western societies is simply Islam as a set of beliefs’ (2021: 2). Murad Idris emphasizes that by making Kazanistan the sole example of a non-liberal but decent people Rawls ‘changes the form of political questions from colonial histories and geopolitical structures to Muslims’ beliefs and practices’ (2020: 14). He points out that Rawls’ account of Kazanistan contains four dimensions to what he, like Norton, designates as the Muslim question, ‘a political constellation in which Muslims in Europe and America are treated as “a problem”’ (Idris 2020: 2).

[T]he Muslim Question commonly has four aspects: Islam and Muslims are alien to “the West,” which is supposed to have received its bearings from the Enlightenment and liberalism; the salient divide is the cultural orientation and religious beliefs of Muslims; Muslim difference causes conflict or poses a threat to national identity, unity, or security; and hence, the demand that Muslims assimilate in order to be tolerated (ibid: 4).

Rawls reintroduces these four familiar topics ‘at the level of the international order’ (ibid). Even though one can of course question whether Rawls *intended* to posit such a clear relationship between Islamic religion and the policies of his imaginary people, it is significant that his description of Kazanistan contains

<sup>60</sup> El Amine points out that Rawls’ connecting of Islam and imperialism ‘is also particularly noteworthy because “empire and territory” do not come up in Rawls’s account of Western history’ (El Amine 2021: 16). This account, put forward in *Political Liberalism* (2005), discusses the Reformation, the rise of the modern state, and the development

of science as being central to the development of modern political philosophy. ‘[T]he persecuting zeal mentioned in relation to Christianity relates primarily to intra-Christian conflicts’ (El Amine 2021: 16) and not to states’ colonial endeavors taking place in the same period.

several representations of Islam that are reminiscent of historical, Orientalist thinking which has been rigorously criticized (Jung 2011; Massad 2015; Masusawa 2011; Said 1978). As we saw in the first chapters of this thesis, the ideas that Islam and despotism are closely linked, that Islam is expansionist and warlike, and that it does not separate religion and politics, are all central to this body of thought. Even when the ‘Muslimness’ of Rawls’ hypothetical country would be ‘purely incidental [...] the terms of its features are fundamental to the Muslim Question and thus to the broader discourses and inherited frames in which *The Law of Peoples*’s consideration of Islam participates, no matter Rawls’ intentions’ (Idris 2020: 3).

### Conclusion

Cécile Laborde rightly argues that analogizing or comparing religion with ‘core convictions’ or ‘comprehensive doctrines’ betrays a Protestant bias. Both Rawls and Maclure/Taylor view religion as a matter of individual, conscientious, conviction that helps us understand our values and commitments and steer our moral judgments. They thereby overlook the communal, habitual, embodied aspects of religion and neglect to recognize that some parts of religious experience cannot be reinterpreted as stemming from individual conscience.

Contestable assumptions about the nature of religion, however, are not to be found solely in the theorists’ chosen analogies; I have tried to show that in emphasizing that religions are coherent and complete value systems, which contain an impenetrable transcendent core, these authors minimize the room for conflict within religion and stress the idea of the irreconcilability of ‘competing’ religions. By discussing the focus on the Reformation and its aftermath of religious warfare, I have tried to demonstrate that the authors’ accounts of religious and moral pluralism are modeled on a historically specific construction of religious conflict. Even those political liberals who do not single out religion as uniquely special, but work with an analogy that incorporates both religious and secular beliefs and commitments, attribute to religion a special role as a source of societal conflict. This liberal focus on religion as inherently conflictual, which is central to the work of Habermas, might lead to a position which ‘directs our criticism of absolutism or fundamentalism in politics in a one-sided and myopic manner against religious or theological fundamentalism and thus tends to neglect all secular threats to liberal democracy’ (Bader 2007: 109). Such assumptions about religion – which are definitely substantive enough to put both Rawls and Maclure/Taylor ‘at odds with a theologian’ – therefore merit critical analysis and should at least be made explicit in debates on the relationship between politics and religion. To completely open ‘the black box of religion’ it is also necessary

to further examine representations of specific religions and believers. Rawls' description of Kazanistan shows that historically charged notions can still find their way into contemporary political theory.

I have argued that in examining the history of religion within liberalism the focus should not solely be on the development of a particular definition of 'religion' and the 'religious', but also on the accounts of problematic and dangerous forms of religiosity that are part of liberal thought, and on the ways in which these have been, and continue to be, projected on particular people and religious traditions. In the next chapter I will examine the ways in which contemporary political theorists can respond to such a critical genealogical perspective in rethinking their normative accounts of the relationship between religion and state. I will argue that political theorists who want to take seriously such a perspective should be less focused on the way religion is *defined* and examine more critically what the concept of religion *does* in the framing and governance of societal conflict. I will put forward this point by engaging with Laborde's disaggregative account of religion and the liberal state.

# Chapter 6

## **Disaggregation and Danger. Formulating a Response to Genealogical Critiques of ‘Religion’**

Political philosophers working on state-religion relationships, I addressed in the introduction, have only recently started to respond to critiques pointing out liberal theory’s unsatisfactory and partial construal of the concept of ‘religion’. As I discussed in chapter three, many of these critiques emphasize one aspect of the concept’s construal, namely its Christian – or more specifically Protestant – foundations. The critiques point out that liberal thought is permeated by implicit Protestant notions of what religion *really* is. The way liberal political philosophers understand and treat religion, they argue, has been strongly influenced by their use of a specific *definition* of religion as something that is ‘private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed’ (Sullivan 2005: 8). The tracing of ‘religion’s’ historical lineages back to its emergence in post-Reformation early modernity thus challenges the universal character of the concept and raises the question of parochialism.

While bringing these Protestant inheritances to light is a complex and useful project, so far I have argued for, and contributed to, a different and more expansive approach to religion's genealogy; for the historical trajectory under scrutiny did not *solely* produce a particular definition of 'religion' and the 'religious', but, as I have shown, it also gave shape to ideas concerning problematic and dangerous forms of religiosity which were projected onto specific religions and groups of 'believers'. I have further problematized some genealogists' focus on the *continuity* of theological categories by pointing out the risk of adopting essentialist ideas about the nature of different religions, and for remaining blind to the ways in which changing historical and political contexts have shaped discussions on religious difference. Theological categories and binaries are unstable, becoming productive only in specific contexts and are 'put to use' serving different political interests. Lastly, I have emphasized religion's historical entanglements with other categories such as ethnicity, nationality, race, and civilization, an aspect of religion's historical narrative that calls into question the dominance of 'religio-secularism' as a main perspective for understanding social plurality and conflict.

In this final chapter I will discuss what this broader and more contextually sensitive account of religion's historical trajectory has to offer to political philosophers working on normative questions regarding state-religion relationships. I argue that political theorists, reflecting on the 'historical embeddedness' of liberal thought on religion, should look beyond 'Protestant definitions', and take liberal theory's ideas about dangerous religiosity, and its historical entanglement in ethno-religious hierarchies, more closely into account. I will elaborate on what I see as the merits of such a broader account for liberal political theory by examining Cécile Laborde's recent disaggregative approach to religion and the liberal state. I focus on the way Laborde's account is formulated in response to what she describes as 'the critical religion challenge', the critiques developed by the broad range of scholars who point out the 'indeterminacy and inadequacy of the liberal construal of religion itself' (Laborde 2017: 15). In the first part of the chapter I will discuss the limits of Laborde's response to the critical school. I focus on *Liberalism's Religion* (2017), because in this book Laborde carefully rethinks religion's place within liberal theory and successfully constructs a theoretical account that does not depend on a specific definition of religion, nor relies on historically construed assumptions of dangerous religiosity. In this sense she resolves fundamental problems in liberal political theory. Nevertheless, I will argue that her book presents too narrow an account of the critical religion challenge and for this reason leaves open the question of how to analyze and

critique political practices, discourses, and institutions that reproduce ethno-religious hierarchies, and which rely on contested notions of dangerous religiosity or prejudicial views of particular religions.

In the second part of the chapter I will discuss several examples of policy and political discourse in which ethno-religious hierarchies and the specific constructs of ‘dangerous religion’ can – and often do – play a role. All are related to what has come to be designated as the ‘securitization’ of Islam. I use these examples to argue that political theorists should not only reflect on their conception of religion but also on the kind of state-religion relationships they choose to engage with. A more politically and historically sensitive approach to religion entails a move away from political theory’s favorite hard cases which can be neatly divided into questions of freedom of religion and questions of establishment. Instead, political philosophers should recognize the diverse ways in which religion and religious difference can *become* politicized. What is needed, I argue, is a stronger engagement with the securitization and surveillance of religion. Political theory should reflect on how states determine whether a religious group, act, or speech constitutes a threat; for historically produced and potentially prejudicial notions of dangerous religiosity can be a part of state discourses on orthodoxy, extremism, fundamentalism and radicalization, and thus come to play a role in identifying threats to public order and security. What is also required is a stronger focus on the specific political contexts in which religious difference acquires significance. Political theory should thus not only question how religion is *defined*, but also what it *does* in the framing and governance of social conflicts – e.g. those about immigration and integration – and how it interacts with other categories such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and civilization.

### **Taking Seriously the Critical Challenge**

As we saw in the previous chapter, Cécile Laborde agrees with liberal egalitarians who argue that a state which wants to treat its citizens equally cannot single out religious convictions and activities as ‘uniquely special’. When discussing questions of free exercise and non-establishment, liberal egalitarians do not solely focus on religion and religious beliefs. The category of what is *protected* by religious freedom, and what the state should *separate* itself from according to the notion of separation between religion and the state, is extended by analogizing or comparing religion with other beliefs, identities, and commitments (Laborde 2014a).

While Laborde endorses the liberal egalitarian approach, she is critical of the analogies used by different authors. In her recent work, she aims ‘to revise the liberal egalitarian theory of religion and the state, providing a more complex

picture of what religion is *like*, by identifying an array of politically or legally-relevant dimensions of religion' (Laborde 2017: 14). She thus asks what aspects of religion should matter to liberalism. Her disaggregation approach distinguishes several features of religion that are connected to different liberal values. By examining the liberal values associated with the principle of *non-establishment* of religion, Laborde identifies those dimensions of religion a liberal state 'has good reason to contain or separate itself from' (ibid: 239). A focus on the liberal principles connected to *freedom of religion* – both collective and individual – helps ascertain which features the state has reason to protect. Religion thus has many distinct dimensions that should be captured by different aspects of the law. Religion as a conception of the good life, as a moral obligation of conscience, as a key feature of identity and a mode of association, but also religion as an inaccessible doctrine and totalizing institution, are all part of Laborde's non-exhaustive list of relevant dimensions of religion (Laborde 2015: 595-596).

Laborde's theory is formulated in response to what she calls the 'critical religion challenge'; a challenge posed by a diverse and interdisciplinary group of scholars whose 'main claim is that the liberal attempt to define the "just bounds" between the state and religion' is an impossible exercise because 'there is no non-arbitrary way to single out, and fairly regulate, a stable, recognizable sphere of religion' (Laborde 2017: 6). Here I shall discuss how Laborde takes on the challenges of these critical scholars; I will argue that she too readily puts aside some types of criticism as being applicable to mainstream liberal discourse but not to political philosophy (ibid: 15). I will then go on to argue that even though Laborde's own disaggregative theory *does* successfully avoid most pitfalls identified by critical religion scholars, her 'list' of the legally relevant dimensions of religion runs the risk of being interpreted as a list of 'problematic' forms of religion that can be readily applied to specific groups of believers.

### ***Three strands of critique***

In *Liberalism's Religion* (2017) Laborde distinguishes three strands within the critical religion school: the *semantic*, the *Protestant* and the *realist* critique. The core of the semantic line of critique is the notion that there exists no 'stable, universally valid empirical referent for the category of religion' (ibid: 17). The category that describes religion as a universal, but distinct, aspect of human life consisting of a set of propositional beliefs and corresponding practices is a Modern, Western invention that developed against the backdrop of the post-Reformation fragmentation of Christianity, colonial expansion, and processes of nation-state formation (Asad 1999; 2003; Harrison 2002; Nongbri 2013;

Smith 1998). This new concept of religion, which was most clearly articulated by John Locke, positions beliefs about God firmly in the realm of individual salvation and makes religion into an ‘internal, private, depoliticized entity’ (Laborde 2017: 20).<sup>61</sup>

In the same period, imperial conquests led to the birth of modern comparative history of religion. The notion that the newly-conquered peoples of the New World had beliefs and practices that could be called *religious*, and that these religions structurally resembled each other – e.g. they all had deities, narratives, places of worship, authoritative individuals resembling clergy – culminated in the nineteenth-century invention of the ‘World Religions’. Critics, however, have shown that it is, in fact, impossible to find a ‘common core or essence’ in these World Religions (Laborde 2017: 20). While some lack a deity, others are more community – rather than belief – centered. Comparative historical scholars show how ‘World Religions’ – most famously Hinduism and Buddhism – were invented by forcibly fitting a variety of existing forms of life into a Christian mold (Smith 1998; Masuzawa 2005). “‘Religion’ thus became the conceptual grid through which knowledge of exotic peoples was filtered into the Western imagination’ (Harrison 2002: 92). Semantic critiques draw on these histories to argue that the category of religion ‘lacks conceptual coherence’ (Laborde 2017: 20). As Elisabeth Shakman Hurd, whom Laborde considers to be a proponent of this strand of critique, succinctly states: ‘religion is too unstable a category to be treated as an isolable entity, whether the objective is to attempt to separate religion from law and politics or design a political response to “it”’ (2015: 6).

The second strand of the critical religion school draws on the same Western European historical trajectory to argue that the ‘political and legal treatment of religion [...] is biased towards individualistic, belief-based religions’ (Laborde 2017: 21). This strand, which Laborde calls the Protestant critique, has been strongly influenced by Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and other scholars following in their footsteps. Asad’s critique is partly semantic, but he adds that the strong co-dependence of the modern concepts of religion and of secularism has led to the development of a specific discourse and legal regime biased against forms of religiosity that do not fit the Protestant mold (Asad 1993; see also Nongbri 2013: 5). Laborde states that the scholars who belong to this strand of critique argue that Modernity is Protestant in two senses:

<sup>61</sup> In chapter three I discuss and criticize a range of authors who attribute to Locke this central role in the development of the modern concept of religion

(see for example De Roover and Balagangadhara 2008; Mahmood 2015; Spinner-Halev 2005).

First, it coincides with the emergence, in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, of a newly secular mode of political governance, which relies on a set of foundational and mutually reinforcing binary oppositions: between divine and civil obligations, between belief and reason, between thought and action, and between mind and body. Second, drawing on the Protestant rejection of Catholic ritualism, it sees true religion as firmly located on the first side of each opposition: religion is about mind, belief and thought, and about the individual's freedom to interpret the nature of her religious obligations (Laborde 2017: 20).

Again, John Locke is given a central role in formulating these foundational oppositions. Following Luther's notion of *sola fide*, ritual and ceremonies – involving worldly acts and bodily behavior – were allocated to the category of *adiaphora*, or 'morally indifferent things'. Because they were not considered necessary for salvation, which could be reached by faith alone, they fell under the authority of the magistrate. The binary oppositions overlap with the distinction between the *forum internum* and the *forum externum*: the former seen as the unfringeable realm of individual beliefs and conscience, and the latter as the domain of action, or worldly and bodily practice, over which the state should have jurisdiction (Laborde 2017: 22; see also Harrison 2002) .

It is this conception of religion as 'primarily about belief in a set of propositions to which one lends one's assent' that is criticized by Saba Mahmood (2009: 844). This normative model of religion, she argues, is biased against those forms of religious life that do not have at their center a belief in creedal truth. Religious practitioners who give shape to a pious self through ritual observance, cultivation of bodily practices, or forms of community, are less easily accommodated by laws which incorporate a Protestant definition of religion. This comes to the fore in arguments in defense of laws against the Islamic practice of veiling. The regulation of this religious practice is often legitimized by arguing that it does not curtail inner belief, merely outer practice. Moreover, because veiling is not an unambiguous creed of Islam, it cannot be interpreted as a religious obligation (Laborde 2017: 22; see also Asad 2006; Jansen 2011; 2013).

The third type of critique is what Laborde calls *realist* criticism: those theories arguing that the liberal state's engagement with religion amounts to 'a constant and arbitrary reconfiguration and regulation of religion in the interests of secular state power' (Laborde 2017: 36), and those that argue liberalism itself is a religion, or at least contains a conception of the good and cannot, therefore, be sufficiently neutral towards different views of the good life. Throughout her book Laborde develops an answer to these aspects of the realist critique, conceding the point that the liberal egalitarians indeed 'cannot avoid evaluating the normative

salience of different kinds of beliefs, practices, and identities', nor can they 'avoid granting the state the authority to delimitate the proper boundaries of religion' (ibid: 41). This means that the liberal egalitarian project will have to give up some of its claims of neutrality, but it can do so, Laborde suggests, without losing its liberal legitimacy. This is what Laborde aims to achieve with her own disaggregative theory of liberalism and religion. Before discussing this account in detail, I will first comment on her response to the semantic and Protestant critique and argue that the sharp distinction between the different branches of the critical school leads to certain blind spots.

#### *The semantic and Protestant critique*

Both the semantic and the Protestant critique draw on the historical co-development of liberalism and the category of 'religion'. Critical scholars point out that religion was 'remade' and given 'new forms and meanings' in early modern thought and argue that this has influenced the way in which liberal theory currently comprehends religion and defines the roles it can and cannot legitimately play in society. Laborde seems to have a somewhat ambivalent view regarding the relevance of these genealogically inspired critiques of liberalism. While she argues that the 'historically-specific genesis of liberalism [...] has generated problematic philosophical blind spots' (ibid: 17), and while she claims dispensing 'with the western-, Christian-inflected construal of religion that liberal political theory relies on' (ibid: 3) is one of the aims of her book, she also emphasizes that a historical critique cannot 'serve as a philosophical critique of liberalism' (ibid). Like Jean Cohen (2018), Laborde thus points out the genetic fallacy committed by some critical genealogists.

Recent historical scholarship has indeed successfully debunked the mythical origins of liberalism, Laborde maintains. The narrative, present for example in the work of John Rawls, in which the secular state resolved to steer clear of (religious) truths to stop post-Reformation religious violence, has been fiercely criticized (See also chapters four and five and for example Casanova 2008; Cavanaugh 2009; Spohn 2015b). Early modern religious toleration, it has been shown, was *not* a 'philosophical achievement' of the Enlightenment but rather a 'pragmatic and often grudgingly negotiated social practice' (Laborde 2017: 16). These forms of 'gritted teeth tolerance' (Connolly 2005: 69) were embedded, not in liberal notions of freedom of conscience and individual rights, but in Christian theologies, and connected to the formation of the absolutist (confessional) modern state which generated new forms of political violence (ibid; see also De Dijn 2012).

Laborde admits that this form of historical scholarship provides a ‘penetrating critique of mainstream liberal discourse and of the popular, “enchanted” story of the liberal state’ and adds that this narrative has ‘been used to equate religion with persecuting fanaticism (notably of the Oriental, specifically Muslim “Other”)’ (Laborde 2017: 17). Even so, the same critique, she says, does not apply to philosophical liberalism. Even those philosophers who use these contested narratives ‘do not justify their commitments to toleration, individual rights, and state neutrality by appeal to history’ (ibid). Conjuring up ‘the tainted history of liberalism’ does not necessarily discredit it, and while it is true that liberalism developed within a Christian context this does not make liberal philosophy ‘irremediably Christian’ (ibid). A further response Laborde formulates to the critical school of religion is that many of its adherents ‘judge liberal theory through the lens of liberal practice’ (ibid). Authors such as Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin rightly criticize the way the European courts ‘police the boundaries of acceptable religiosity’ (ibid). Liberal *theorists*, however, have been highly critical of the culturally majoritarian notions underlying secular laws and policies.<sup>62</sup>

Liberal egalitarian theory in particular, Laborde contends, can answer the challenges of the semantic and the Protestant strands of the critical school. These theories, following Rawls’ political liberalism, are not rooted in a ‘comprehensive secularist worldview’ (ibid: 27), and do not single out religious ways of life as uniquely problematic. Liberal egalitarians deny the special status of religion and ‘seek to extend and generalize the protections (and burdens) traditionally associated with religion [...] to broader categories of secular doctrines, practices, and ways of life’ (ibid: 26). The semantic critique, therefore, does not apply to these theories, for they employ an interpretive, not a semantic conception of ‘religion’. It is not necessary, Laborde emphasizes, for the law, or policies, to capture the whole of religion. The law has a normative purpose, and liberal egalitarians pose the question ‘what is it about religion that is protection-worthy?’ (ibid: 31). What matters is the correct identification of the values the liberal law aims to protect. Liberal egalitarians, therefore, do not have to resort to controversial definitions of religion at all.

The Protestant critique, arguing that liberal theory singles out belief-based religion and privileges Protestant religion by being biased against practice-based, ‘unchosen’ conceptions, is not directly applicable to liberal egalitarian

<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, some have argued the opposite, namely that courts have been more flexible in their conceptualizations of religion than many theoretical accounts. Veit Bader describes the shift of the U.S. Supreme Court that moved from a conceptualization of religion that was biased

towards the Christian majority, towards a ‘very broad, ecumenical, permissive and subjective’ definition ‘based on the perspective of the claimant’ (Bader 2012: 7) and points out similar shifts in other countries and international covenants (Bader 2007: 301).

accounts either, Laborde states. Again, because religion is not treated as uniquely special, liberal egalitarians need not resort to a (Protestant) *definition* of religion as belief. Freedom of religion, for example, protects not only religion but a generic human capacity, and can thus be ‘guaranteed through basic liberal freedoms such as freedom of thought, speech, and association’ (ibid: 32). And while egalitarians have disagreed about exemption cases – ‘the bulk of which is about practices’ – their disagreements are not about the question of whether practices count as ‘religious’, but whether the liberal state can legitimately restrict the exercise of these practices by appealing to other values and principles. Public order arguments and majoritarian sensibilities too often play a role when screening the legitimacy of minority practices, Laborde admits. The ECtHR has been ‘notoriously lenient’ towards Christian practices while being strict towards the public presence of Islam. However, she remains unconvinced ‘that such majoritarian prejudices can be traced back to a liberal philosophical bias in favor of belief-based, voluntarily-chosen religious practice’ (ibid: 33). As discussed in the previous chapter, Laborde does point out the Protestant bias present in the liberal egalitarian account put forward by Maclure and Taylor, who single out duties of *conscience* as uniquely worthy of exemptions and special protection (Maclure and Taylor 2011; see also Laborde 2014a). Philosophical liberalism in general, however, is ‘not committed to the implausible view that religion is essentially about belief not practice, or that it has to be chosen to deserve respect’ (Laborde 2017: 35-36).

In response to Laborde, I argue that even liberal egalitarian approaches that do not need to resort to specific and problematic *definitions* of religion can conceptualize or treat religion and religiosity in a way that merits critical assessment. In Laborde’s discussion of these genealogically inspired critiques the emphasis lies on the historical development of a specific (Protestant) *definition* of religion as individual, internal, depoliticized, belief-based, and freely chosen. I maintain that this emphasis presents a rather narrow account of the critical religion challenge (see also chapter three). The genealogy presented in this book can be of use for a more thorough evaluation of the way these liberal theories deal with religion. The development of an idealized category of religion, I showed in earlier chapters, went hand in hand with the construal of ideas about the problematic and dangerous dimensions of religion. Furthermore, discussions on ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ often aimed to establish Christianity and, in concordance, Europe’s place in the history and hierarchy of civilizations. The interconnectedness between the development of a particular understanding of religion and liberalism’s regulative dimension which is connected to ideas about religious danger disappears from view by distinguishing the Protestant and semantic critiques so sharply from realist criticism.

A focus on a Lockean relegation of those aspects of religion not related to ‘that inner worship of the heart’ to the category of *adiaphora* – things unessential for, or indifferent to, salvation – therefore creates a skewed image of the historical genesis of religion within liberalism.<sup>63</sup> While it is not incorrect to state that true religion was often seen as ‘firmly located on the first side of each opposition’ – ‘between divine and civil obligations, between belief and reason, between thought and action, and between mind and body’ (ibid 2020: 60) – the *second* side of the opposition was not only regarded with *indifference*. It is on the second side of these oppositions that we find those features of religion that were considered problematic or dangerous. As was discussed in chapters one and two, Enlightenment scholars commonly associated religions that contained legal or civil obligations, worldly activities, and bodily practices to problematic forms of particularism and intolerance, political violence, and fanaticism. While it is true that Jewish observance of the ceremonial law was sometimes used to argue that Judaism was ‘not a religion at all’, as we see in the work of Immanuel Kant (1996a/1793: 154), in other cases the attachment to rituals was invoked to claim that the Jewish religion was particularistic and exclusionary in nature and would therefore always be violent to outsiders (see for example Montesquieu 1800/1748:134). The legalism of the Jews and the political nature of Islam were not only opposed to the spiritual nature of Christianity but also related to the idea that followers of these religions were unreasonable, aggressive, and unable to compromise. As I have shown in the first part of this dissertation the historical tropes of political religion, materialism/ritualism, particularism, and fanaticism/violence are entangled in complex ways.

In the thought of Locke himself one can also find more than ‘just’ the distinction between religion’s internal realm of conscience and an external realm of practice. His work also contains a moral ordering of Judaism and Christianity, and of Protestantism and Catholicism. As discussed in chapter three Locke also puts forth ideas on the dangers of specific forms of religious authority, present in the *beliefs* of Catholics and Turkish Muslims who therefore pose a threat to public order and stability and consequently should not be tolerated. I further showed that Locke’s intolerance towards Catholics and Turkish Muslims cannot ultimately be explained by his distinction between inner *faith* and *adiaphorous acts*. Both groups are thought to pose a risk to stability and order because their *beliefs* prevent them from being loyal to their governments, as they are obedient to the Pope and the Mufti respectively. Locke was unwilling to extend tolerance

<sup>63</sup> In chapter three I develop a more elaborate critique of readings of Locke that present him as the founder of the *forum internum/forum externum*

distinction. As discussed in that chapter the belief-action dichotomy is far less central to his theory of toleration than it is often made out to be.

towards potential rebels. A focus on the historical development of the liberal definition of religion overlooks its relationship with another pillar of liberal thought, namely that it can be characterized ‘by a particular kind of anxiety, the fear of unlimited, concentrated, or arbitrary power’ (Geuss 2002: 323). Heather Rae argues that a ‘problematic side of this anxiety’ is visible in the history of liberal toleration: ‘From the beginning, liberal intolerance of those perceived to be connected, through religious affiliation or beliefs, with arbitrary or absolute power, and therefore deemed to pose a threat to the existing order, has justified social exclusion’ (2018: 294). What lingers in contemporary liberal thought is thus not only a Protestant conceptualization of religion but also a set of anxieties about dangerous religiosity:

For many secularists, neither the appearance of religious practices in public, nor the free exercise of religion for the members of religious groups, nor religious talk in public deliberation is the problem. Rather, it is the idea that some forms of piety can be related to religious fanaticism, which in turn can motivate violent political action; hence, it is about politics becoming ‘faithful’ in a specific sense that European intellectual traditions have mostly reflected on in terms of fanaticism (Jansen 2011b: 988).

For a thorough rethinking of ‘the way liberal political philosophy has understood and treated religion’ (Laegaard 2020: 9) engagement with these intellectual traditions is necessary.

Distinguishing between the semantic, Protestant and realist critiques as if they are three separate branches risks overlooking this interconnectedness between the development of definitions of (true) religion, ideas about religion’s dangers, the problematization of specific religious groups, and the regulation and remaking of (dangerous) religion by state power. While some critical scholars do indeed focus on the effects of certain legal definitions of religion as belief (Mahmood and Danchin 2014: 5), others emphasize the interaction between such conceptualizations and the problematization of specific forms of religiosity, which leads to active regulation of religion by the state. The connectedness between the Protestant and the realist critique becomes apparent, for example, in the work of those critical scholars who examine the role of the Protestant notion of religion – as something interior and private – in the increased securitization of Muslims. This connectedness, which will be discussed in more detail below, is explored by Jansen who argues that the idea that religion is ultimately a matter of interior beliefs or mental states, can, paradoxically, lead to its politicization and securitization: ‘It does so by interpreting religious practices as “semiotically insecure”, separate from the “real” intentions of the practitioners’ (Jansen 2011: 2).

Hussein Agrama develops a similar argument when he analyzes how the modern separation of ‘private belief and public act’ brings with it a ‘structure of suspicion’ constituted by inquiries into sincerity and a ‘constant attempt to unmask ulterior motives of material interest’ (2015: 306).

In Laborde’s analysis the semantic and the Protestant critiques seem to point out liberal theory’s reliance on a specific understanding or category of religion, while the way sovereignty and power shape both politics and religion is the object of realist criticism. However, many of the critiques challenging liberal and secular understandings of religion emphasize that these two elements are co-constitutive. Coming back to Laborde’s response to the critical school, I believe she is right to state that a historical critique *in itself* is not a philosophical critique. However, it is necessary to take the coalescence of different aspects of the historically specific genesis of religion into account when examining the blind spots of liberalism’s treatment of religion. Early modernity not only brought forward an idealized definition of religion, it also identified religion’s dark sides and projected these onto specific religious groupings. Laborde does seem to acknowledge the importance of these types of critiques when she argues a specific historical narrative has ‘been used to equate religion with persecuting fanaticism [...] notably of the Oriental, specifically Muslim “Other”’, but argues it is mainstream liberal discourse, not political philosophy, that falls prey to this critique (Laborde 2017: 17).

Liberal philosophy, I maintain, is let off the hook too easily here. The identification of those features of religion that pose a difficulty – or danger – for the liberal state and which should, therefore, be contained, or at least not be endorsed, is a key aim of many liberal theories of religion and politics. Those authors discussing the issue of non-establishment, the separation of church and state, and the permissibility of religious arguments in public debates, especially draw on specific (problematic) characteristics of religion to make their claims (see chapters four and five). I will show that liberal theory, even in its egalitarian form, can be assessed more thoroughly and critically when one is made aware that the history of liberal thought not only brought forth a contested idea of what religion is or *should be*, but it also posited contested ideas about which aspects of religion pose a problem or danger, and presented prejudicial ideas about particular religions.

### ***Liberal philosophy and religion’s dark sides***

In chapter four I discussed how the influential work of Jürgen Habermas is a prime example of how these contested notions of religion’s problematic features still play a role in liberal theory. His work on public reason and the place of

religion in public deliberation reveals several other implicit assumptions on the nature of religion and of Islam specifically. Habermas connects religion to dogmatic truth claims, inviolability, authoritarianism, and a source of totalizing energy, and therefore considers it, ultimately, as a source of political violence (Habermas 2006: 8). In later work he adds that the communitarian nature of ritual worshipping makes religion, and arguments stemming from religion, inherently particularistic and exclusionary (Habermas 2011a). Furthermore, religion's problematic features are most closely associated with what he calls 'non-reflexive' religion (Habermas 2006: 19). While Habermas believes Judaism and Christianity have completed a process of becoming reflexive – and therefore 'no longer have any fundamental difficulties with the egalitarian structure and the individualistic character' (2008a: 305) – Islam has not and thus remains characterized by claims to '(fanatical) truth-possession' (Jansen 2011b: 991). Habermas reinforces the distinction between these religions by ascribing to Judaism and Christianity a foundational role in the development of core liberal democratic values and principles, such as equality, autonomy, and toleration (Habermas 2002: 148-149).

One could reply that Habermas is not a liberal egalitarian, as he repeatedly singles out religion as uniquely special. Liberal egalitarians are, by nature, indeed less vulnerable to charges of relying on a 'problematic construal of religion' as they tend towards a broader scope of moral concern and can thus circumvent having to define religion, so one could question what Habermas' position says about liberal egalitarianism. I contend, however, that liberal egalitarians do at times make use of problematic construals of religion's dangerous dimensions. For example, as I have argued in the previous chapter, both John Rawls and Charles Taylor/Jocelyn Maclure emphasize that religions are coherent and complete systems of values, which contain an impenetrable transcendent core. The authors minimize the room for conflict within religion and emphasize the idea of an irreconcilability of 'competing' religions. They thereby implicitly contribute to the idea that the nature of religion causes it to be a unique source of societal conflict, and that clashes between religions are particularly difficult to resolve.

The liberal egalitarian authors Laborde discusses in *Liberalism's Religion* at times also rely on similar assumptions about the nature of religion. While liberal egalitarians argue that 'the old idea of religious nonestablishment should be generalized into state neutrality about the good' (Laborde 2017: 69), they have different views on which aspects of the good the state should keep its distance from. Religion, in their theories, is treated as a paradigm case: religious conceptions of the good are those that should most certainly not be endorsed, but as they might share some defining characteristics with

secular conceptions, the principle of non-endorsement or neutrality must be extended to include secular ideas of the good exhibiting that same feature. Religion thus still functions as a 'key coordinating concept' which sets the 'entrance requirements' (Sherwood 2015: 33). Ronald Dworkin, for example, argues that the state should be neutral towards people's personal ethics: 'their profound convictions about life and its responsibilities' (Dworkin 2013: 117). The state should therefore not appeal to such 'conceptions bound up with personal ethical conceptions of the meaning and value of life' when justifying laws and policies (Laborde 2016: 259). While he maintains that some secular conceptions of the good share this characteristic with religious convictions and should therefore not be endorsed by the state, he does *not* allow for the idea that some religions are not, or not predominantly, comprehensive views on how one should live one's life (Laborde 2017: 78).

Eisgruber and Sager reinterpret the notion of nonestablishment as 'as an implication of liberal principles of neutrality and equality' (ibid: 79). While they do not believe that the state should be strictly separate from religion it should refrain from 'advantaging or disadvantaging [...] persons or groups because of the spiritual foundations of their deeply held beliefs and commitments' (Eisgruber and Sager 2007: 70). When they discuss the issue of expressive endorsement, they argue it is unfair to only prohibit the endorsement of religious speech and symbols, for this would amount to the unequal and thus unfair treatment of religious citizens. What is impermissible, they argue, is 'the institutional expression of symbolic inequality' (Laborde 2017: 84). This means that the state cannot symbolically affiliate itself with, or endorse, any views that would cause the impression that some citizens have a different civil status than others. Again, religion is treated as a paradigm case, and again the authors invoke a contested view of religion's problematic dimensions when they explain which features of religion would make endorsement specifically problematic:

Conventionally recognized religions insist on public rituals (forms of prayer, ways of dress, dietary practices, and so on) that mark members publicly and may provoke puzzlement, distaste, contempt, or worse from outsiders. Membership in these religious groups has traditionally been an all-or-nothing matter (either you are in or you are out), and it is a high-stakes affair: not only worldly reputation but eternal salvation may be at stake. When membership in a group is a matter of great import, is publicly visible, and is associated with practices that seem indispensable to members but strange or even threatening to nonmembers, the potential for conflict and discrimination is great (Eisgruber and Sager 2009: 828).

Religion's potential for 'civic disparagement' thus lies in its ritual nature and public visibility but also, Eisgruber and Sager believe, in religious doctrines 'which often link true belief and virtue, so that nonbelievers are judged to be tainted by the very fact of their nonbelief' (ibid). It is religion's particularism that makes it exclusionary and potentially violent to outsiders. Traditional religions, they state, 'create an environment ripe with the potential for discrimination, hostility, or mistreatment' (ibid).

While Laborde is critical of the liberal egalitarians, and the analogies they choose to extend the state's scope of concern, I believe she absolves them too easily from critiques stemming from an analysis of the historical construal of 'religion'. While it is true that these authors do not work with a definition of religion as a matter of individual conscience, freely chosen and belief-based, the mirror image of such a characterization is plainly visible in their discussions of non-establishment and separation. The state should keep away from religion because it has certain innate characteristics – e.g. a systemic and exclusionary nature, a transcendent core, and an inability to compromise – which would make its establishment problematic. While these authors believe secular doctrines or convictions might *sometimes* share these characteristics, they do not allow for the idea that religion does not always include them. Furthermore, as we saw in the discussions of Habermas and Rawls in the previous chapters, a specific view of Islam as a religion that, more than others, exhibits problematic features such as fanaticism, can also be found in liberal political theory and not only in 'mainstream discourse'.

### **The Disaggregative Approach to Non-establishment**

Laborde herself, as I will show, does not fall prey to the use of the same problematic assumptions about the nature of religion. In her disaggregative theory of religion and the state, she does identify certain features a religion *can* have that a state has 'good reason to contain or separate itself from' (Laborde 2017: 239). Like other liberal egalitarians, Laborde wants to extend the scope of non-establishment and state neutrality to include not only religion but other beliefs, identities, worldviews, and ideologies. Unlike other egalitarian authors, she does not treat religion as the prime example of *that which should not be established*. Instead, Laborde starts by identifying those 'liberal values associated with the nonestablishment of religion and the neutrality of the state' (ibid: 239).

A liberal state, Laborde argues, is a state that is justifiable, inclusive, limited, and sovereign. Each of these components 'picks out a different feature of disaggregated religion: religion as *inaccessible*, religion as *vulnerable* and religion as *comprehensive*', and lastly, religion as theocratic (ibid: 117). However, these

dimensions of religion are not treated as inherent, but as *possible* features. The state should separate itself from religion ‘not in virtue of some feature it essentially and exclusively possesses, but in virtue of features it contingently possesses, along with other salient beliefs, conceptions and identities’ (ibid: 202). Laborde thus brings the notion of restricted neutrality – the idea that the state can endorse some aspects of the good, not others – to its logical conclusion. If religion does not have one of the identified characteristics, there is nothing wrong with endorsement.

A liberal state should not, Laborde says, use arguments that citizens find inaccessible. This thin epistemic criterion rules out the use of reasons drawing directly on the existence of God, the authority of scripture, or personal revelation, for these arguments cannot be understood or assessed by others. However, Laborde emphasizes that religious arguments do not always fit that description; the idea that a religious argument cannot be anything but a ‘crude prescription from God’ is incorrect, she claims (ibid: 126). Religious arguments can contain self-supporting reasons. Religious conservative ‘appeals to the public good of social order, to the good of the institution of marriage, to the right to life, and so forth, cannot be ruled out as incompatible with public reason’ (ibid: 123). Even though their reasons might not be shared with secular citizens they are publicly accessible and can be understood as reasons. Furthermore, the accessibility criterion does not only rule out religious arguments; state officials who draw on purely personal experiences make use of arguments that are similarly inaccessible.

A second value the liberal state wants to protect by not endorsing a specific religion or conception of the good is *inclusivity*. It is, however, not directly clear what form of separation follows from this notion of inclusivity, and which forms of engagement between state and religion are allowed. Laborde focusses on the case of the symbolic endorsement: can a state ‘legitimately attach itself to the majority religion – via, for example, religious symbols in public institutions, the recognition of religious holidays, and non-mandatory oaths and prayers in public?’ (ibid: 134). Symbolic religious establishment is wrong, Laborde argues, when – and only when – it ‘communicates that religious identity is a component of civic identity’ (ibid: 135). The relevant dimension of religion, in this case, is that religious identity can function as a ‘marker of social vulnerability and domination’ (ibid: 136). Again, religion here is not uniquely special, but can, as a ‘third-person identity’, be compared with other ‘socially vulnerable identities’ such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, and culture (ibid: 137). Furthermore, an assessment of religion’s exclusionary impact should take the historical and societal context into account. Religion is not universally and inherently divisive. While Laborde

believes that ‘in the Euro-Atlantic world where religion has provided one of the most enduring fault lines of social conflict and exclusion’ (ibid: 136) religious identities are particularly salient, she provides the example of Senegal where Islam is symbolically endorsed by the state without disparaging effects (ibid:142).

A third liberal value the state should aim to protect is the limited reach of its authority founded on a commitment to personal liberty. This substantive ideal, Laborde argues, is one of the ‘fixed points of the liberal tradition of political thought’ (ibid: 143). The dimension of religion this liberal value picks out is the Dworkian notion of ‘religion as comprehensive ethics, in the sense that it integrates within a meaningful framework a whole range of matters such as family arrangements, sexuality, education, eating codes, work, dress, and so forth’ (ibid: 143-144). A liberal state, by contrast, does not interfere with the way citizens live their lives because it is committed to ethical individualism. On the level of justification, this liberty is infringed when the state appeals to a comprehensive worldview for legitimizing a certain policy. The liberty is also violated if a law, or policy, however justified, limits a person’s liberty to ‘live with integrity’ (ibid: 65). Integrity-related liberties are those ‘essential to the exercise of citizens’ core moral powers: notably, their capacity to formulate and live by their own ethical commitments and projects’ (ibid: 147). This means there is room for some religiously-inspired policies as long as these do not infringe on personal liberty and are not justified by appealing to the truth of one comprehensive worldview. As long as the *truth* of Christianity is not used, for example, as the argument for a shared day of rest on Sunday, such a rule need not be problematic. Neither is the implementation of (partial) *Shari’a* law:

It is not obvious, for example, that *Shari’a* (Islamic law) regulations concerning banking rates or charity (*zakat*) cannot be permissibly enforced by a liberal state – assuming they do not infringe on the personal dimension of the ethical life (ibid: 149).

The limited state not only needs to keep its distance from comprehensive dimensions of religion, but also from secular comprehensive worldviews. It cannot, therefore, justify a recycling duty by arguing that a virtuous life is a life of sustainability. Nor can it implement a secularly justified policy that infringes on integrity related liberties: e.g. a duty to have children because this would stimulate the economy.

Laborde adds that determining what, exactly, falls under the sphere of personal ethics, and what the state should keep its distance from, cannot be decided once and for all. This jurisdictional boundary problem – the determination of what is public and what is private and what, therefore, falls under the scope of justice –

cannot be solved by appealing to liberal principles. However, Laborde argues that in a liberal society the state has the ultimate authority to decide over its own scope of authority and must do so in a democratic way (ibid 165). Decisions about the scope of liberal justice – should it apply to health, education, familial relationships? – are made by the *demos*. By being sovereign the state thus distances itself from a fourth dimension of religion, namely its theocratic dimension.

### ***Disaggregation and essentialism***

As with the liberal egalitarians discussed in the previous section, Laborde identifies those dimensions of religion that the liberal state should not endorse. However, her theory has distinct advantages over those of the other egalitarians. Firstly, she skillfully avoids having to make any claims about the nature of religion or specific religions. She emphasizes that inaccessibility, vulnerability (or potential for division), and comprehensiveness are features that do not apply in all contexts or to all religious beliefs, identities, and activities. Determining if such a problematic dimension is present thus takes place on a case-by-case basis. She therefore circumvents the problems that, for example, Eisgruber and Sager run into, when they argue that religions should not be symbolically endorsed because they are ritualistic and thus inherently exclusionary. While they make use of a contested and essentialist notion of religion, Laborde does not need to resort to such a definition with her claim that religious identities can, in many contexts, indeed be socially divisive and thus vulnerable. The potential for division is not so much located within religion itself, as an inherent characteristic, but in the way ‘religion has historically functioned as a social category structurally vulnerable to hostility, discrimination, disparagement, and neglect’ (ibid: 88). Unlike Habermas, she does not make use of a historically specific notion of the unsolvable nature of religious conflict when she discusses the dimension of *accessibility*. Religious arguments are not precluded from the political debate because ‘religion’ is characterized by dogmatic truth-claims that do not allow for compromise, but because these arguments can, in some cases, be inaccessible to fellow citizens.

Laborde’s list of legally relevant dimensions of religion should thus not be read as a list of ‘religion’s problematic features’. However, keeping in mind that the historically-specific genesis of religion’s dangerous sides, and the projection of these problematic characteristics onto Judaism and Islam resonates in the work of many political philosophers, it comes as no surprise that Laborde’s list will at times be read as precisely that, as, for example, in “The Consequences of Disaggregation and the Impossibility of a Third Way” (2017), in which Ronan McCrea opposes Laborde’s argument for allowing both specific forms of symbolic endorsement and religious

forms of justification for law. Permitting these forms of engagement with religion, he says, will produce ‘political conflict that is more likely to be intractable than conflict on other bases, because of the problematic features of religion highlighted by Laborde’ (McCrea 2017: 70). While, of the individual problematic features identified by Laborde, there do indeed exist non-religious equivalents, there is, according to McCrea, still reason to single out religion: ‘This is because predominant religions in the West combine these problematic factors in a way in which non-religious analogues generally do not’ (ibid). The four *possible* dimensions of religion, in McCrea’s theory, become four ‘components’ of Western religion. Interestingly, McCrea also interprets one of these components in a slightly, but significantly, different way, defining religion not as a *vulnerable* but as an *immutable* identity (ibid: 71). He also adds another familiar feature to the list, namely the ‘passionate nature’ of religious belief, a feature that fits the historical discourse on fanaticism. Religion, McCrea goes on to say, ‘does not exist in the world in disaggregated form’ (ibid). It is the combination of all components that make necessary the separation of religion from the state. Like Rawls and Habermas, McCrea draws on the history of Western Christianity and its wars to illustrate the conflicts that can be caused by religion. While it is possible that some societies are not at risk of political chaos and conflict – namely those where ‘individuals’ religious identity often changes over their life or whose dominant religious traditions either do not see God as having concrete views as to how life ought to be lived or preach cooperation and liberalism’ – Western societies are (ibid: 72).

While McCrea emphasizes the conflict-ridden history of Christianity he adds that ‘other faiths may have the problematic characteristics to a degree even greater than Christianity’ (ibid: 78). He then invokes the legalistic nature of Islam and Judaism to argue that these religions have greater difficulty accepting the secular political order:

The greater the degree to which believers see God as having laid down law-like rules, the harder it will be for them to accept the legitimacy of man-made legal rules that appear to go against such divine law. The vast majority of Muslims regard the Koran as partly a legal text and also the unadulterated word of God. Most adherents to ultra-Orthodox Judaism also see their holy text as a legal document to a significant extent. Such an approach to a holy text will often make it harder for believers to adapt to a secular political order. Approaches to a holy text that see it as a human rendition of God’s beliefs and desires will have greater scope to disregard a part of the text that appears contrary to secular law or liberal norms as potentially erroneous (on the basis that human imperfection means that the relevant part of the holy text is an incorrect reflection of God’s will) or as subject to reevaluation in the light of modern norms and knowledge (ibid: 78).

For these types of religion, ‘ensuring God’s rule on earth comes above all other considerations’ and the ‘absence of political cooperation and continual violence are a price worth paying for the chance to establish religious virtue on earth’ (ibid: 79). For McCrea the features identified by Laborde are thus not only reasons for non-endorsement, they are also inherently connected to societal conflict and violence. In his theory the normative status of legal traditions within religions is in direct tension with peaceful citizenship and the maintenance of a stable political order.

McCrea thus uses the disaggregative approach to put forward a strongly essentialist notion both of ‘religion’ and of specific religious traditions. And while Laborde, unlike McCrea, does *not* consider disaggregation as ‘a useful tool for informing us as to what are the characteristics of religion that are particularly damaging to political coexistence’ (ibid: 75), let alone as a tool for establishing the problematic nature of whole traditions, her list does run the risk of being used in such a way. This is especially so in the contemporary context of public and political discussions about ‘the dangers of religion’, focussing primarily on the presence of Muslims in Europe and the U.S., and fueled by international conflicts, discussions about immigration and integration, and Islam-inspired terrorist attacks.

This contemporary political context is, somewhat surprisingly, virtually absent in *Liberalism’s Religion*. A reflection on the contemporary political circumstances in which the presence of Islam is regularly discussed as a specific problem for safety and national identity, or ‘Western values’, could have been of significant use in formulating a more adequate and comprehensive response to the genealogical criticism, pointing out the blind-spots of the liberal understanding and treatment of religion. To take seriously the critique of the historically constructed nature of the liberal account of religion also means reflecting on the ideas about dangerous forms of religiosity and the ethno-religious hierarchies that were part of this construction. Responding to such a critique requires a consideration of the many ways in which religion and religious difference are *politicized* within the liberal state. In the following section I will discuss what such a shift of analytical focus within political-philosophical discussions on religious difference might entail. I will home in on an area of policy and political discourse in which ethno-religious hierarchies and the specific constructs of ‘dangerous religion’ *can* and *do* play a role, namely, what is now often broadly designated as the ‘securitization of Islam’ (Buijs 2009; Cesari 2010; Fox and Akbaba 2015). I introduce this topic in order to argue, first, that political theory is in need of more in-depth reflection on how states determine whether religion is a threat to public order and security; and second, that it should focus on the specific social and political contexts in which religious difference becomes salient by asking what it does in the governance and understanding of social conflicts, and how it interacts with ideas about nationality, race, civilization, and ethnicity.

### Disaggregation and Dangerous Religion

While Laborde's theory of religion and the liberal state generally steers clear of ethno-religious hierarchies and contestable ideas about religious danger, it does not always provide clear guidance in navigating political discourses, institutions, and policies that *are* immersed in them. This is due, at least in part, to the work's focus on the constitutional principles of establishment and freedom of religion. The example cases discussed by Laborde – cases central to the work of many political philosophers theorizing the relation between religion and the liberal state – are not the ones that bring the hierarchies discussed into sharp focus. The broad topic known as the 'securitization of Islam' directs our attention to cases in which these hierarchies and ideas about dangerous forms of religiosity do play a central role.

Fox and Akbaba define securitization as the development of discourse constructed around a 'perceived threat', and the 'promotion of actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure that requires commitment of greater resources in order to eliminate it' (Fox and Akbaba 2015: 177). They argue that such a securitization process aimed at Islam, and Muslim presence, took place in Western democracies following 9/11. It describes a wide range set of discourses, policies, and institutions, some of which are concerned directly with security – e.g. measures countering terrorism and violent extremism at home and abroad – while others are related to different policy areas such as immigration and integration. The concept of 'securitization' can also be used to describe the proliferation of restrictions on Islamic religious practices – such as religious dress and the building of mosques – that are not, or not solely, motivated by security arguments but rather stem from a more diffuse idea of Islam as a threat to national or civilizational identity (Cesari 2010; Edmunds 2012; Fox and Akbaba 2015).<sup>64</sup> Securitization is thus related to two entangled 'strands of socio-political discourse on Islam and Muslims – the narrative of (failed) social integration and cultural (in)compatibility, and the narrative of security' that have become a 'mobilizing issue for forces of the political right and, at the very least, a major challenge for those in the political center' (Mandeville 2017: 59). In the last part of this chapter I will examine those questions and challenges for liberal political philosophy on religion which arise from these two strands of securitizing discourse and policy.

<sup>64</sup> Fox and Akbaba researched policies and laws in place in twenty-seven Western democracies restricting religious freedoms of minorities in the period between 1990-2008. They conclude that

Muslim minorities have been subject to religious discrimination because of the proliferation of policies limiting their religious freedoms (2015).

### *Islam as a security threat*

The War on Terror prompted the states of the global west to establish security apparatuses for the surveillance of Muslim populations both within and beyond their borders. These institutions have since developed into, what is now called, a ‘global surveillance order’ (Renton 2018: 2125). Countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives have been a prominent feature of counter-terrorism strategies in many states. The rise of ISIS in 2014, and the ‘foreign fighters’ traveling to and returning from Syria and Iraq, have led to a proliferation of CVE strategies in many European states. This intensification was further stimulated by fears of ‘home grown terrorism’ increased by the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in 2015, and the other terrorist attacks committed in Paris that same year (ibid: 2134). Concerns about the spread of radical Islam, violent jihadism, and terrorist violence have led to a greater use of security and public-order arguments for regulating groups and individuals. States presently focus on the direct regulation of religious groups and individuals who are deemed a clear and present danger, but also aim to ‘identify and reverse the process by which Muslims become potential terrorists (radicalization); when they make the shift to thinking like a terrorist, but do not yet act as one’ (ibid: 2134). Government agencies – but also civil society actors<sup>65</sup> – therefore scrutinize religious individuals and organizations, and analyze speech and behavior to determine whether a person or association poses enough of a danger to legitimize a restriction on their liberty. In doing so state actors have to make judgements about religious groups and ideas, make complex distinctions between e.g. orthodoxy and extremism, and identify the processes of ‘radicalization’. It is in this contemporary context of securitization that contested ideas about dangerous religiosity, connections between certain dimensions of religion and violence, and the violent nature of Islam, can come to play a role.

The attempts of several European states to regulate extremist Islamic preachers illustrate the complexities involved in defining the meaning of ‘public order’ and of determining when an individual or organization poses a *threat* (Cesari 2010; Fox and Akbaba 2015). Public-order arguments have not only been used to curtail the speech of Imams inciting terrorism or violent jihadism – speech that can be more or less unambiguously related to security interests – but also of those with ‘intolerant views’.<sup>66</sup> In a response to parliamentary questions on ways to prevent

<sup>65</sup> The Prevent legislation in the UK has made it a duty for teachers and other public servants ‘to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’ (HM Government 2015: 3) by identifying and referring those individuals they believe to ‘vulnerable to radicalization’ (ibid: 5).

<sup>66</sup> In the Netherlands and Denmark public order arguments have regularly been used to prevent

Islamic preachers from spreading ‘intolerant and extremist’ views. In the Netherlands a restraining order placed on an Imam to prevent him from speaking in a particular neighborhood in the Hague was legitimized by the argument that the Imam preached an intolerant message in an area where there is ‘a lot of radicalization’. He thereby ‘contributes to a process of radicalization towards Jihadism’ (Klaassen 2017, my translation).

mosques from inviting extremist speakers, the Dutch government stated that ‘anti-integrative or antidemocratic messages’ can form a threat to ‘public order or national safety’ and that it is therefore not acceptable that ‘mosque boards invite speakers with intolerant, anti-integrative and/or anti-democratic messages’ (*Aanhangsel Handelingen II*, 3250, 2015, my translation). In 2016 Denmark passed a law that placed restrictions on ‘anti-democratic’ speech, specifically when expressed as part of religious education (Hofverberg 2017). The country also bans foreign preachers who ‘want to undermine Danish law and values and support parallel legal systems’ (ibid).

In both Germany and the Netherlands politicians have asked for a general ban on Salafist associations. In the Netherlands, a motion for a blanket ban was denied, but in response the government did develop a ‘concretized policy response to Salafism’ (*Kamerstukken II*, 29614, nr. 39, 2016, my translation). This governmental letter exploring approaches to regulate Salafism identifies a broad range of attitudes and conduct that are considered to be in tension with the ‘values underpinning the democratic legal order’ (ibid). Some of these ‘problematic behaviors’ – e.g. terrorism, violence, and hate speech – are in direct breach of legal norms, while others are not. The approach indicates ‘isolation from society’ and the ‘rejection of the democratic order as a form of government’ (ibid) as undesirable behavior that might require government intervention. When organizations behave in a way that is not unlawful but can still ‘be considered problematic’ (ibid) the government proposes intervention by confrontation and ‘disturbance’, for example by strict enforcement of permits and local regulation of building and safety measures (ibid).

These examples of the regulation of Imams and Salafist religious organizations provide an illustration of the state ‘policing the boundaries’ of permissible and impermissible, acceptable and unacceptable, forms of religion. It is this type of ‘policing’ that is brought to the fore by what Laborde calls the ‘realist strand’ of the critical religion school, which argues that this type of policing amounts to ‘a constant and arbitrary reconfiguration and regulation of religion in the interests of secular state power’ (Laborde 2017: 36). Following Laborde and other liberal political philosophers, notions like ‘public order’, ‘social stability’, and ‘workplace safety’ describe public goods that can be legitimately used to justify policies. However, Laborde argues that where such notions clash with integrity-related commitments, the latter bear a special weight. People whose integrity-related liberties are limited by a general law are therefore candidates for *exemption*. In such cases a balancing test is needed ‘which weighs up the interests pursued by the law, the severity of the [...] burden, and the costs incurred in alleviating it’ (ibid: 220).

Laborde thus concedes the realist point that the state regulates and shapes religion, but would argue that in a liberal democracy such governance is not arbitrary, but regulated by liberal and democratic principles.<sup>67</sup> As we saw above, she also rallies behind the criticism voiced by Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin who focus on the way the notion of public order privileges ‘majoritarian sensibilities’, and protects majority religion or culture by defining these as ‘consubstantial with the public order’, while restricting minority practices (Mahmood and Danchin 2014: 142). Liberal theory does contain robust critical resources for addressing the way public-order arguments are used to limit the practices of religious minorities; it can point out the priority of individual freedoms and equal treatment, and problematize norms and rules that limit the religious freedoms of minorities. Despite these critical notes on the use of public-order arguments I want to argue that Laborde’s theory, and other liberal egalitarian views on exemption, provide insufficient guidance in navigating the types of cases discussed above. Theorists of religious exemption focus on general laws that clash with the liberties of certain groups or individuals, but generally do not discuss cases in which the state has to decide whether a specific religious activity, group, or individual poses a danger significant enough to impede religious liberties. These types of cases, I want to argue, merit special attention.

Public order is a slippery and flexible concept shifting between ‘public morals and national security’ (Agrama 2012: 218). Criticizing interpretations of public order that equate it with majority culture or religion is, therefore, unquestionably important. However, a narrower, security-based account of public order does not automatically lead to a fair treatment of minority practices. States that use a more ‘neutral’ concept of public order, by limiting its use to the protection of ‘national security’, must still define what constitutes a *threat* to that security. Taking into account the fact that the historical construal of an idealized notion of religion went hand in hand with the development of ideas about the problematic and dangerous dimensions of religiosity, and the projection of these dangers onto specific groups of believers, the discussion of cases in which the government scrutinizes religious organizations, activities, and individuals, and makes judgements about the possible threats these pose, is especially important.

<sup>67</sup> The outcomes of the balancing tests that are needed in these cases cannot be decided on once and for all. Following Rawls, Laborde allows for the idea that there are different ‘reasonable conceptions of justice’ (Rawls 1999a: 128). Interpreting the precise meaning of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ and the balancing of competing liberal principles – such as freedom of religion and non-discrimination – can garner different reasonable outcomes. The same can be said about the *scope* of justice: the boundaries between ‘the religious and the non-religious, the public and the private, the right and the good’ (Laborde 2017: 5) are

not fixed. The democratic state has the ultimately authority to decide ‘which social practices are justice-apt’ (ibid: 104) and whether principles of justice should apply in the domain of family life, education, and religious organization. Fair democratic procedures to deliberate and decide on both the *scope* and *content* of justice therefore are a necessity: ‘Because liberal values are inconclusive and indeterminate, and compatible with a wide range of laws, policies and institutions, democratic deliberation about them is essential to their legitimacy’ (ibid: 157).

Laborde's book does not engage with cases in which states need to make judgments about the possible threats posed by religious actors, and her work provides no guidance in preventing the introduction of historically constructed notions of dangerous religiosity into these judgments. It is the state, Laborde argues, that ultimately defines 'what constitutes *harmful* behavior – a key notion in the regulation of religion, as it sets out the boundary of permissible religious activities' (Laborde 2017: 166). It follows that the state also defines what poses a *threat* to the public order or national security. And while Laborde argues that integrity-related liberties bear a special weight, the outcome of balancing tests weighing the importance of public-order concerns, and the importance of these liberties, is also – at least in the first instance – decided by the democratic state. It is unclear how democratic deliberation about these topics can steer clear from the above-mentioned notions of dangerous religiosity and historically construed ideas about the specific dangers of Islam. In her discussion of non-establishment Laborde skillfully evades marking out religion as a 'special source of danger', by disaggregating it into distinct, contingent, dimensions. The examples discussed above, however, show how easily Islam returns as a special source of danger within the liberal framework and in state policies.

One of the anxieties of liberalism discussed in previous chapters is the fear of forms of religion that are considered political or legalistic. Historically, Islam has been often characterized as a religion connected to political authority and consisting of a particular set of legal rules, and therefore as a threat to those states and social orders its adherents could or would not subject themselves to. This characterization has been revived by nationalist politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who argue that we should not see Islam as a religion but as a 'political ideology' recognizing only the *Shari'a* as its law.<sup>68</sup> In the Dutch public debate on the ban of Salafist organizations, politicians described Salafist views as a 'political and ideological attack on the rule of law (*rechtstaat*)' (Abels and Besselink 2016, my translation). The policy documents on the further regulation of these organizations not only emphasize violence or incitement of hatred as problematic behaviors, they also focus on isolationism and propagation of an 'alternative political order' as actions that dangerously undermine the democratic order. To regulate extremist preachers on a municipal level the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) defended a restraining order placed on an Imam by stating that his speeches contained the message that 'standing up for Muslims and Islam is a divine command' (Versteegh 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Geert Wilders, of the Dutch anti-Islam party Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV) has called Islam a 'political ideology', a 'totalitarian ideology' and a 'violent political conquest ideology' which accepts no 'constitution or legislation other than Islamic Sharia law' (*Kamerstukken II, 35039, nr. 3, 2018,*

my translation). In the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign, Michael Flynn, who campaigned for Donald Trump and later briefly became his National Security Adviser, argued that Islam was a political ideology 'masquerading as a religion' (Mandeville 2017: 62).

This message, combined with ‘animosity towards different groups such Shiites, Jews, atheists and the West’, it was argued, could ‘inspire’ terrorism and violent Jihadism in his listeners, despite the fact that the Imam does not preach actual violence (ibid).

Without taking a stance on the legitimacy of this restraining order, I want to argue that this line of reasoning *can* be problematic if it too readily connects religiously inspired political views, or forms of activism, to violence. *The Brennan Centre for Justice* recently addressed the fact that U.S. counterterrorism programs ‘almost uniformly identify protected political and religious views as a basis for identifying people who might be terrorists’ (2017: 2). The center shows how government CVE programs list devotion to a political cause that is connected to Islam – e.g. ‘increased activity in a pro-Muslim social group or political cause’; political grievances about ‘human rights abuses, lack of political rights and civil liberties [...] conflict and foreign occupation’; ‘frustration at U.S. policy and events around the globe’; or ‘concerns about anti-Muslim discrimination’ – as possible indicators of a propensity for terrorist violence (ibid). The increasing preoccupation with *Shari’a* law in European and American public debate can be seen as a further example of the specific problematization of the legal dimension of Islam. Since 2010 fourteen American states have adopted bills that ban the consultation of *Shari’a* in courts – so-called ‘foreign law bans’. More than two hundred of these bills were introduced (Southern Poverty Law Centre 2018). The American Public Policy Alliance (APPA), one of the driving forces behind the anti-*Shari’a* movement, crafted model legislation that was used by politicians in different states. The APPA states their aim is ‘to protect American citizens’ constitutional rights against the infiltration and incursion of foreign laws and foreign legal doctrines, especially Islamic Shariah law’ (American Public Policy Alliance n.d.). While counter-terrorism programs understandably aim at preventing the occurrence of any violent political action in the name of Islam, these examples illustrate that a securitizing approach to Islam and Muslims runs the risk of exacerbating the problematization of any perceived connections between Islam and political aims and activism. The anti-*Shari’a* movement’s monolithic representation of *Shari’a* as an alternative legal order further contributes to the questioning of the political loyalties of those Muslims who want to live according to a certain doctrine or a set of religious rules.

Another dimension of dangerous religiosity discussed in this thesis is the problematization of religion’s embodied and material forms. Practices, ceremonies, and distinctive dress and markings were historically seen as not only irrelevant to ‘true’ religion but also linked to particularism, intolerance, and fanaticism. The current preoccupation with, and increased regulation of,

Muslim women's dress, can also be linked to state security concerns. While critical scholars, such as Mahmood, explain laws against veiling practices by highlighting the dominance of a Protestant category of religion in European law, others have emphasized the security arguments used in legitimizing such prohibitions. In his analysis of verdicts in which the European Court of Human Rights upheld prohibitions of the exercise of an Islamic practice – mostly the wearing of a hijab in public institutions – Nehal Butha shows that the court describes these religious practices as threatening tolerance, non-discrimination, and other liberal-democratic values. Butha further shows that the court interprets the public presence of the hijab as a source of religious tension. The judges express explicit concern that schools which allow their teachers to wear the hijab will become places of sectarian strife (Butha 2014:11; see also chapter three). In her analysis of the French law prohibiting 'conspicuous religious signs' (in practice the hijab), Yolande Jansen similarly questions whether the French laws can be fully understood as an expression of a comprehensive form of *laïcité* which asks for the privatization and interiorization of religion (2011). The modern and Protestant understanding of religion by itself is not sufficient for explaining the law that forbids the hijab and other conspicuous religious symbols to be worn in state schools and other public buildings. The ban was *also* legitimized on the basis of security arguments. Jansen points out that the report of the Stasi Commission advising on the law underscores 'that it was dealing with an issue concerning public order that was overruling the concern for liberty of religious expression' (Jansen 2011: 9). Not only was the hijab seen as a source of conflict *in* schools, the law was also framed as a response to broader societal antagonisms. The committee mentions the growing influence of Islamist groups in French society and believes the law is there to send a strong message to such groups (*ibid*). Jansen further emphasizes that the committee believed that a failure to enact the law would create 'civil unrest' (*ibid*: 9).

The regulation of women's religious dress can thus be connected to Eisgruber and Sager's idea that religion's potential for civic disparagement lies in its public visibility. Religions that 'mark' their members provoke hostility from non-members, and therefore increase 'the potential for conflict' (Eisgruber and Sager 2009: 829). This idea is questioned by Jansen who, as mentioned above, argues that the notion of Muslim presence as a potential security issue might actually be entangled with the modern account of religion as something 'interior' and 'mental'. The idea that a religious practice can be separated from, and possibly *hides* some interior attitude or belief leads to the question of 'what is behind the veil' (Jansen 2011: 10). The 'typically modern simultaneous production of interiority and insecurity' can lead to a culture

and politics of suspicion especially when ‘triggered by experiences that cause fear’ (ibid), such as terrorist attacks. She thereby questions the idea that it is the public visibility of Islam, or Islam’s embodied dimension – the wearing of the hijab – which provokes the antagonism:

Once religious difference has been interpreted as a sign of potential danger that states should act upon (in the name of protecting majorities), fear and scrutiny of ‘intentions’ may only intensify when Muslims become less visibly different but still remain potentially so (ibid: 13).

Liberal egalitarian political philosophy, having rid itself of a historically specific *category* of religion, either by working with a proxy – e.g. comprehensive doctrine – or by disaggregating religion into multiple distinct dimensions, does not necessarily provide guidance in the cases discussed above. Abstracting from the historical inheritances which have shaped liberal theory does not automatically bring about the development of a politically and historically sensitive approach to the relationship between religion and the state. Reflecting on these cases, in which states determine whether a religious group, act, or speech constitutes a security threat that merits intervention, is highly relevant for the development of such an approach. As I have shown in previous chapters, the production of a modern idealized notion of religion went hand in hand with the understanding that materialist, particularistic, and political or legalistic forms of religion were inherently problematic. These dimensions of religion were seen as characteristics of both Judaism and Islam and were often connected to fanaticism and violence. These historically shaped and potentially prejudicial ideas about dangerous religiosity, and the dangerous characteristics of specific religious traditions, can – and have – become part of public debate and state policy focused on identifying and countering such threats. In the identification of threats to public order state security officials engage with and scrutinize religious organizations and speech, and make judgements about religious ideas and attitudes. How to make such judgements – which often entail the use of historically construed and politically contested concepts such as ‘orthodoxy’, ‘fundamentalism’, and ‘radicalism’ – in a just and fair way requires further reflection and theorizing.

### ***Politicizing religious difference***

While the above cases link Islam to direct security risks such as violence and civil conflict, I also want to consider a different manner in which Islam has been securitized, namely by framing it as a more diffuse threat to national values or western civilizational ideals. Samuel Huntington’s (1993) ‘clash of civilizations’

narrative, which assumed an inevitable confrontation between Western (generally Christian) civilization and the Muslim world, resurfaced after the 9/11 attacks (Edmunds 2012: 71). While the narrative was first revitalized by European anti-immigration parties, it also made its way into mainstream political discourses in Europe and the United States (Haynes 2018). Here I want to look at forms of political discourse that incorporate a variant of this this clash narrative in both more and less explicit ways. Some of these forms of speech can be seen as examples of ‘moderate’ or ‘non-coercive’ establishment and thus fit within the freedom/establishment framework. Other forms of political discourse that construct an opposition between Islam and Western, Enlightenment, or national values do not fit into this framework so easily. Here, Laborde’s account of religion, as a ‘vulnerable class’ that is connected to the liberal ideal of ‘civic inclusiveness’, provides a useful tool for engaging with cases that fall outside the framework. While Laborde uses the ideal of inclusivity to problematize forms of symbolic establishment of the majority religion, it can also be used to critically assess other ways in which religious difference is politicized. Before discussing examples of the politicization of Islamic difference I will introduce Laborde’s critique of symbolic establishment.

The question of whether moderate or non-coercive establishment of religion is compatible with liberal democratic principles has recently been discussed by several liberal political theorists (Brudney 2005; Laborde and Laegaard 2019; Laegaard 2017; Modood 2015; Seglow 2017). While there does not seem to be an unambiguous definition of what moderate establishment entails, it describes forms of entanglement between majority religion and the state that do not infringe directly on citizens’ rights and freedoms. The recognition of religious holidays, public displays of religion – e.g. a nativity scene in a town hall –, and public religious statements made by politicians and public officials, are examples of this type of establishment. While these forms of establishment cannot be said to necessarily clash with the freedom of religion of citizens, several liberal philosophers question whether there might be other reasons to object to these types of connections between religion and the state. Jonathan Seglow claims that many forms of moderate establishment are incompatible with public reason, for they can only be justified by reasons based on religious truths (2017: 201). Laborde counters this line of argument by stating that these forms of establishment can be, and often are, defended by appealing to accessible reasons such as ‘historical continuity or national tradition’ (2017: 134). However, as we saw above, she believes there is another objection against the state attaching itself to religion in ways that do not concern ‘the actual rights and opportunities of citizens, but instead their *symbolic* treatment by the state’ (ibid: 134):

Symbolic religious establishment is wrong when it communicates that religious identity is a component of civic identity – of what it means to be a citizen of that state –, and thereby denies civic status to those who do not endorse that identity, who are then treated as second-class citizens (ibid: 135).

This argument ‘relies on an expressive account of government actions’ (ibid: 135). A state that endorses symbols of the majority religion can express an inappropriate attitude towards certain citizens: ‘non-adherents are rejected outside the imagined community of citizens’ (ibid: 136). It is this discussion of symbolic establishment that marks out Laborde’s continued commitment to a republican ideal of justice: ‘The motivating ideal here is not neutrality towards the good in general, but a social idea of nonsubordination and nondomination’ (ibid: 136).<sup>69</sup> According to this ideal, ‘institutions have a crucial role to play in entrenching and representing the equal status of citizens’ (Laborde 2013: 85).

Symbolic establishment of religion has such exclusionary power because religion *can* function as ‘social marker of vulnerability and subordination’ (Laborde 2017: 140), a characteristic it shares with other social categories such as ethnicity, race, and culture. In her discussion of the famous *Lautsi* case Laborde argues that it does not suffice to re-describe a majoritarian Christian symbol – the crucifix in the Italian classroom – as a cultural one, as was done by the European Court of Human Rights: for ‘culture is not intrinsically more inclusive than religion’ (ibid: 134). However, symbolic establishment is not an absolute wrong; its evaluation is context-dependent: the social meaning of religious identity varies ‘from society to society’ and different symbols have different social meanings in different contexts (ibid). One therefore must analyze concrete cases of symbolic establishment to decide whether the symbol in question functions as ‘a way of excluding minorities from equal standing as members of the national community’ (Laborde and Laegaard 2020: 186).

The examples of symbolic religious establishment discussed by Laborde and other liberal theorists pertain to states that associate themselves with the majority religion in a way that does not directly influence the rights and freedoms of citizens. The use of religious symbols in public buildings, and the existence of a ‘national’ church that does not provide its members any privileges,

<sup>69</sup> This ideal plays a more central role in *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy* (2009) in which Laborde defends a Republican ideal of justice that is more ‘citizen centered’ (Laborde 2013: 67). This ideal ‘asserts that justice is not simply about the justification of state coercion and the distribution of basic rights and opportunities, but that it is also about the fair distribution of more intangible forms of social recognition’ (ibid: 85). In *Liberalism’s Religion* Laborde takes a step back from her own preferred

account of justice, emphasizing the reasonableness of different conceptions of justice. Questions and cases not pertaining to constitutional essentials and the ‘distribution of basic rights and opportunities’ (Laborde 2013: 86) are less salient in this book. I would argue that reflecting on the historical trajectory in which liberalism’s religion took shape shows that questions of civil status are of great importance.

are forms of symbolic establishment that are much discussed by liberal political philosophers. However, there are many other ways for states to take up the rubric of religion, some of which have an effect on the inclusivity of the state. The use of ‘religion’ and ‘religious difference’ in the political framing of social conflicts and diversity issues might have similar effects on certain citizens’ social standing as the symbolic establishment of a majority religion. To put such effects on civil equality into sharp focus it is necessary to look beyond the effect of government policy on the division of burdens and benefits, rights and freedoms. Symbolic meaning is also conveyed by the ways in which societal problems are formulated, the manners in which policy solutions are framed, and by the ‘terms in which they are debated’ (Laegaard 2013: 170). Because political discourses have a potential effect on the inclusivity of the state, they are relevant from a normative point of view.<sup>70</sup>

Returning to the revitalization of the ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative, I want to contend that some versions of this narrative are unambiguous examples of symbolic establishment. This is the case, for example, when government officials emphasize the ‘Judeo-Christian foundations’ of society. This way of favoring particular religions through speech is non-coercive and can be considered to be a form of moderate or symbolic establishment as it establishes a clear connection between the state (society) and religion (Brudney 2005). Following Laborde’s line of reasoning, these sorts of political statements, when made by state officials or when part of government policy, should in most cases be seen as problematic. Describing ‘society’ or ‘the nation’ as fundamentally Judeo-Christian directly communicates the point that Judeo-Christianity is a ‘component of civic identity’. It does not matter whether this identity is seen as ‘religious’ or ‘cultural’ as it places those who do not endorse Judeo-Christianity as having (part of) their identity outside the community. It is less clear whether one can also speak of ‘establishment’ when state officials emphasize that certain fundamental liberal and democratic principles are of Christian or Judeo-Christian origin. Such claims about the Christian or Judeo-Christian roots of liberal, Western, or national values appear in the rhetoric of many European politicians and members of state governments (De Waal 2020; Nathan and Topolski 2016). However, this link between liberal values and Christianity does communicate an exclusionary civil identity, especially when liberal values are also seen as ‘membership criteria’ and are made part of integration and naturalization programs or exams (Laborde and Laegaard 2020: 182).

<sup>70</sup> Laegaard examines the changes in the Danish understanding of multiculturalism since 2001 and emphasizes e.g. the symbolic meaning

conveyed by the reframing of ‘all issues relating to multiculturalism as immigration issues’ (Laegaard 2013: 170).

In the *Lautsi* case, which has been extensively analyzed by many political philosophers and legal scholars, it is therefore not merely the obligatory cross on the classroom wall, but also the defense of that cross by Italian courts that communicates an exclusionary message. The Italian court which dismissed the application of the parents who contested the mandatory presence of the crucifix claimed that Christianity provided the foundations for the liberal democratic state's core values. The Christian cross, they argued, should therefore be considered 'a symbol of a value system: liberty, equality, human dignity and religious toleration, and accordingly also of the secular nature of the State', principles that underpin the Italian constitution and European civilization (*Lautsi and others v. Italy* 2011). Countering the idea that the cross sends an outsider message to non-adherents the court added that Christianity is the *only* religion that by its very nature cannot be exclusionary. The symbol of the cross therefore has a role to play in schools which are presently 'attended by numerous pupils from outside the European Union, to whom it is relatively important to transmit the principles of openness to diversity and the refusal of any form of fundamentalism' (ibid).<sup>71</sup> This affirmation of the Christian nature of Italian and European civilizational values by a state court sends a more straightforward exclusionary message than the actual cross in the classroom; this is especially so as Christianity is explicitly opposed to other cultures and religions, as is demonstrated, for example, when the court states that the 'logical mechanism of exclusion of the unbeliever is inherent' to all non-Christian religions (ibid). A serious examination of the liberal ideal of the inclusive state requires a critical scrutiny of such discourses; this scrutiny might be more urgent than that of the established (vestigial) religious symbols themselves.<sup>72</sup>

### ***The politicization of Islam***

The ideal of inclusivity, and the idea that religion functions as a marker of social vulnerability, can also be used to critically assess types of political acts and speech that cannot be described as forms of establishment – as, for example, the

<sup>71</sup> The court thus also introduced a direct security dimension into the judgement: it is the cross that should protect state schools from potential conflicts between students of different backgrounds and prevent the meeting of different cultures 'from turning into a collision' (*Lautsi and others v. Italy* 2011).

<sup>72</sup> In a recent article on symbolic religious establishment Laborde and Laegaard emphasize the importance of political context in judging whether symbolic religious establishment is legitimate. The communicative meaning of a symbol – e.g. a cross on a classroom

wall – and its compatibility with civic inclusivity is dependent on the political context a symbol is part of. This is why Laegaard and Laborde argue that neo-establishment, 'cases where political communities decide to re-state, reaffirm, and re-establish the public prominence of the historically dominant religion' (2020: 184) in response to a perceived threat of migration and Muslim presence, is more exclusionary than vestigial-establishment. However, they remain focused on the normative legitimacy of the majority symbols itself and not on the political discourses and policy narratives that are part of the 'political context' of such symbols.

way in which politicians and government officials speak about specific religious convictions and groups of believers, and in the ways they frame societal conflicts related to diversity. Many contemporary forms of the politicization of Islam and Muslim difference, I will argue below, have an effect on the civic inclusiveness of states. This is a reason for political liberals to engage with the various ways in which the categories of ‘religion’, ‘Islam’, and ‘Muslim’ are taken up by politicians and state officials.

Some ways of speaking about religion are straightforwardly problematic: ‘when the target of the speech is not the beliefs themselves, but some prejudiced, libelous or offensive characteristic attributed to the group itself, we can talk of hate speech via the racialization of religion’ (Laborde 2017: 217). Government speech that contains negative or defamatory stereotypes of Muslims clearly sends an outsider message and harms the civic status of Muslim citizens.<sup>73</sup> Religious convictions however, states Laborde, ‘should be analogized to ideas and opinions open to public critique’ (ibid). While I believe that religious beliefs should not be exempt from criticism, the distinction between ‘beliefs and practices’ on the one hand, and ‘the group itself’ on the other, is a complex one, especially in a political context in which ‘intolerance of religion (and of Islam in particular) has become a stand-in for other fears of difference, often strongly racialized’, and also *because* it is more acceptable to publicly speak of ‘the “challenges” of religious difference for European societies rather than speaking directly of race or other identity fears’ (Bialasiewicz and Gentile 2019: 7).<sup>74</sup>

Claims about the nature of Islam – as a unified system of convictions and practices – and its incompatibility with, for example, liberal values, *can* have an impact on the civil standing of Muslim citizens. When certain *convictions* are continually framed as being fundamentally at odds with societal values it can have an effect on citizens’ ability to ‘enter the public square on equal terms with others’ (Laborde 2013: 84). This is the case, for instance, when conflicts over values or practices are framed as examples of a civilizational clash. Christoph Baumgartner discusses this in relation to the Mohammed cartoons, published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Muslims who peacefully protested against

<sup>73</sup> For an extensive discussion of the relation between hate speech and civil dignity see for example Esther Jansen 2015.

<sup>74</sup> The leader of the Dutch nativist Party for Freedom (PVV), was acquitted of charges of incitement to hatred for statements about Islam before being convicted for his statements about Moroccans. In the political discourse of the PVV it is not easy to separate Wilders’ anti-Islamism from his views on people of Moroccan descent. ‘Muslim’ and ‘Moroccan’ are often used interchangeably. This becomes clear,

for example, from his statements about criminal behavior among Dutch-Moroccan youth: ‘One in five Moroccan youths is registered with the police as a suspect. Their behaviour stems from their religion and culture. You can’t separate that. The Pope was absolutely right the other day: Islam is a violent religion. Islam means submission and conversion of non-Muslims. That interpretation applies in the living rooms of those problem youths, in the mosques. It’s in that community itself.’ (‘GEERT WILDERS (PVV) ‘De Tsunami van de Islamisering Stoppen’’, 2006, my translation).

these cartoons, Baumgartner argues, were still placed ‘outside the realm of public debate’ (Baumgartner 2017: 88). By framing this conflict as a clash between Western Enlightenment values, and fundamentalist, anti-democratic Islam, the civil status of the protesters was questioned. Baumgartner’s discussion points out the relevance of the ‘framing’ of certain conflicts or diversity issues as being primarily about religion, or about a clash between religion – or Islam – and secularism. Such framing in itself might have an effect on the social standing of Muslim minorities.

Another example of such framing, in which people holding certain beliefs or attitudes are placed outside the imagined community in an even more explicit manner, can be found in the 2017 campaign strategy of the biggest government party of the Netherlands. For the national elections the Liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) campaigned with the slogan ‘Act normal or leave’. In a newspaper advert containing a letter to ‘all Dutch people’ the Dutch prime minister and party leader Mark Rutte stated:

We feel a growing discomfort when people abuse our freedom to ruin things here, while they have actually come to our country for that freedom. People who don’t want to adapt to our habits and reject our values. Who harass homosexuals, mock women in short skirts or call ordinary Dutch people racists. I understand very well that people think: if you reject our country so fundamentally, I’d rather you leave. I have that feeling too. Act normal or leave (Rutte 2017, my translation).

While the prime minister does not mention religion or Islam directly here, further on in the letter, and in several campaign interviews, he focusses on certain Muslims’ refusal to shake hands with members of the opposite sex as a concrete example of ‘abnormal’ behavior. By not simply criticizing certain values and habits – for example by saying that they go against equal treatment – but introducing them as a good reason for leaving the country, the sense of belonging and the loyalty of people who hold them is questioned. In a political context where there is a continued focus on the presence of Islam and Muslims, and where the critique of Islam is prevalent not only among right-wing politicians but also among mainstream political parties and members of government, it is necessary to further explore when and in what ways the framing of conflicts and critique of religious beliefs and practices effects citizens’ civil standing.

There is another relevant aspect to the Dutch prime minister’s letter: the ‘abnormal’ beliefs and attitudes mentioned are not only considered as justified reasons to *leave*, they are also seen as ‘foreign’ – *introduced* by immigrants, those who ‘come to our country’ (ibid) to enjoy the benefits of freedom. It is necessary to critically engage with the ways in which issues of religious difference within

states are increasingly bound up with *immigration* issues. This development can be seen in European societies where the category of ‘Muslim’ has become frequently employed in debates and policies concerning immigrant integration (Mattes 2018), and where solutions for conflicts about religious differences (e.g. discussions about the toleration of certain Islamic beliefs or practices) are sought in stricter immigration laws or integration and naturalization policies. It is necessary to explore how religious categories – such as ‘Muslim’ – interact with other third-person identities such as ‘foreigner’, ‘migrant’, or ‘refugee’ ‘as questions of the tolerance of difference (religious or otherwise), and how “hospitality” to migrant populations have become entirely intertwined’ (Bialasiewicz and Gentile 2019: 2). This became highly visible in both public and political responses to the European refugee crisis of 2015. The Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, and the displacements caused by these developments, led to discourses in which ‘Islam’, ‘terrorism/violent conflict’ and ‘refugee’ became seen as intimately connected. This ‘entanglement’ resulted in a growing securitization of forced migration and exclusionary politics (Wilson and Mavelli 2016: 1).<sup>75</sup>

This reframing of diversity issues as being those of immigration and integration can affect the ‘symbolic meaning’ conveyed by policy narratives: ‘the framing of something as an issue of immigration policy turns it into an issue of essential identity rather than negotiable interest’ (Laegaard 2013: 129). Continually connecting debates about the tolerance of Islamic difference to the topics of migration and integration sends an ‘outsider’ message, as the contested belief or practice in question is reframed as ‘foreign’ and in tension with citizenship. The use of ‘Muslim’ as a central category in political and societal debates over these topics ‘detaches the targets of immigrant integration policies from specific regional/national ties and eventually from the process of immigration itself’ (Mattes 2018: 188). This process – designated by some as the ‘Muslimisation’ of immigration (ibid: 186) – can have an effect on second-generation immigrants, who through this process ‘rebecome “other.”’ (Allievi 2005: 8).

The liberal egalitarian ideal of civic inclusiveness can thus direct our gaze to a broader set of issues other than the one typically focused on in political philosophical debates on state-religion relationships. The cases discussed above provide examples of politicization of religious difference – Islamic difference more specifically – that can have an effect on the civic inclusiveness of states.

<sup>75</sup> This questioning of compatibility of certain forms of religious difference and citizenship and loyalty to the state also comes to the fore in the recent political focus on the foreign funding of Islamic organizations and Mosques in e.g. the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark. Debates on foreign funding show the entanglement of third-

person identities of ethnicity and religion. States worry both about the import of fundamentalist versions of Islam but also about the influence of foreign states on residents and the disintegrative effects this influence has (See for example Borger 2015; Van Eerten 2020).

It is therefore necessary to look further into the many different ways, and different contexts, in which ‘religion’ is made into a political issue.<sup>76</sup> The inclusiveness of the state is not only threatened by its attachment to a majority religion, as is the case with symbolic establishment; it can also be effected by the way state actors identify and debate societal problems, by the way they criticize certain religious views and practices, and by the categories used in the framing of policy.

### Conclusion

To seriously consider a critique of the historically constructed nature of liberalism’s religion, I have argued, means also looking at the accounts of *problematic religion* that were part of this construction. This entails looking beyond religion’s Protestant roots and engaging with a broader range of other intellectual traditions, such as the intellectual history of fanaticism and the genealogy of liberal thought on Judaism and Islam.

Contested notions of problematic or dangerous religion, and the projections of these on specific faiths and believers, are part not only of ‘mainstream liberal discourse’ but also of liberal political philosophy. Political, public, and philosophical debates would gain by acknowledging the influence of these histories. I believe it is ineffective to relegate these histories to a separate realm of prejudice, or majority bias, which is then discussed independently from liberal political theory.

Laborde’s theory of religion and the state does not rely on historically construed assumptions of dangerous religiosity, nor does it depend on a particular definition of religion. Therefore, it can be argued that it achieves part of its aim of ‘overcoming the problematic aspects of ‘historical embeddedness in a particular Western culture’ (Laborde 2017: 141). However, I have also argued that Laborde’s book does not always provide the tools to analyze and critique political practices, discourses, and institutions which are steeped in ethno-religious hierarchy, and that rely on contested notions of dangerous religiosity or prejudicial views of particular religions. While it might be true that it is unfair to ‘judge liberal theory through the lens of liberal practice’ (ibid: 16), it is necessary to discuss and explain how liberal theory deals with the hierarchies and conceptual entanglements that are part of this ‘practice’. In the choice of her cases, Laborde instead abstracts away from these inheritances. It, therefore, remains somewhat unclear as to how disaggregating religion can play a role in many actual cases of religious governance, such as those related to the securitization of Islam.

<sup>76</sup> The normative significance of the politicization of religion might further depend on different contextual factors - e.g. is it an issue discussed in parliament, by members of government, or in courts? As the inclusiveness of the state is used

as a normative criterion here it matters whether an exclusionary message is made on behalf of the state - in defense of government policy - or whether it is part of a political campaign. I do not explore such issues here.

Rethinking the place of religion within liberal political theory should thus not only entail reflecting on the concept of religion this theory relies on; political theory should also critically engage with state-religion relations which do not fit a conceptual framework that neatly schematizes these relationships into those pertaining to freedom of religion and to establishment of religion, for this binary can distract ‘from critical engagement with religious hegemonies’ (Beaman 2015: 212). The securitization of Islam directs our focus towards those cases of state religion interaction that do not fit the framework but which would benefit from the critical scrutiny of normative political philosophers. In the second part of the chapter I have looked at examples in which states politicize Islam, either as a direct threat to security or as a more diffuse threat to values of national or civilizational identity. It is necessary to further explore the ways government discourses and policy narratives establish religion as a dominant faultline. This is especially relevant as European states in particular have increasingly focused on religion – or more specifically the presence of Islam – as one of society’s main diversity challenges.



# Summative Conclusion and Discussion

In 2009 a ban on the construction of minarets was adopted in Switzerland. Fifty-seven percent of Swiss voters supported the proposal in a popular referendum initiated by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Federal Democratic Union (EDU). The minaret, it was argued by SVP politicians, should be understood as a 'symbol of political power, a prelude to the introduction of sharia law' (Traynor 2009) and as a challenge to 'fundamental rights' (Swiss Minaret Ban Gains Momentum, 2008). EDU campaigners described minarets as 'symbols of Muslim victories over newly conquered lands' (Soukup 2009). Campaign posters featured a woman in a chador surrounded by minarets resembling missiles, piercing the Swiss flag.

In this dissertation, it has been demonstrated that these characterizations of Islam – as a legalistic system; as being in pursuit of political aims and violent conquest; and as being in direct opposition with ‘European’ fundamental rights such as those of gender equality – have long histories. While investigating the way Enlightenment scholars discussed Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and used these religions to demarcate the boundaries of a European civilization, it was difficult not to see regular parallels with contemporary public and political discourse. For ‘across Europe, a variety of parties and movements are re-claiming the rubric of religion in order to draw boundaries between who should, and who should not, belong to the common European home’ (Bialasiewicz and Gentile 2019: 1). In many European states – but also increasingly in the U.S. – politicians appeal to Christian or Judeo-Christian values to characterize both European and national civilizational identities. Furthermore, the questioning of the compatibility of Islam, in part, or as a whole, with European or Western values – defined as either secular, liberal-democratic, or Judeo-Christian – has moved from the margins into mainstream political discourse (ibid; see also Mancini 2014; Mondon and Winter 2017; Witteveen 2017). In many European states one can further observe an increased regulation of Muslim practices and symbols such as the *hijab*, the *burqa*, and the minaret. In those controversies over the public presence of religion which ended up in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the court continuously upheld the right to publicly display Christian religious symbols while siding with state prohibitions of Islamic practices (Bhuta 2014; Cebada Romero 2013; Mahmood 2015; Mancini 2009). The court’s decisions show:

[A] dichotomous construction of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, according to which the former – to be sure in a secularized form – is projected as a central component of Western civilization, while the latter is cast as a threatening “other” (Mancini 2009: 2631).

One can question whether these developments, which take place in self-proclaimed liberal states, are indicative of a problem with liberal political *theory* on the relationship between religion and the state. The *practices* of existing states, so it is claimed by, for example, Cécile Laborde, do not in themselves ‘invalidate the theory of liberal secularism’ (2020: 58). Many critical scholars of religion and secularity, however, do believe that the majoritarian intolerance underlying state practice is illustrative of certain biases that are part of liberal *thought*: ‘The European obsession with the regulation of Muslim religious symbols has become the *cause célèbre* supposed to discredit the liberal claims to religious neutrality’ (ibid: 58). Laborde argues that liberal political philosophers ‘have remained largely

unperturbed by these criticisms' because they in fact *agree* that the regulation of the practices of Muslims is 'deeply illiberal' (ibid). As a result, critical religion scholars – a group Laborde characterizes by their distinctive 'focus on the concept of religion relied on by liberal political philosophy' (ibid)– fail to enter into productive conversations with the theorists they criticize. Political philosophers, and those critical theorists who claim that liberalism relies on a historically specific and biased construal of religion, 'talk at cross-purposes' (ibid: 58).

In this thesis I have attempted to contribute to a productive conversation between critical genealogy and liberal political philosophy. A genealogical approach to liberalism's religion, I have argued, enables the formation of a critical perspective on both the practices of governance of contemporary states *and* on the work of contemporary political philosophers working on normative questions on religion's place within the liberal state. I therefore question the sharp distinction between practice and theory made by Laborde. The genealogical perspective developed in the first part of this dissertation has been used to put into sharper focus the assumptions about religion, religious dangers, and specific religious groups many contemporary political theorists rely on. It has also been used to argue that the concrete cases of religious governance – such as the worrisome developments briefly outlined above – require different forms of engagement of normative political philosophy. They require attentiveness to the specific political contexts in which the category of religion and ideas about religious difference have once again become salient, both in the understanding and in the governance of social conflict.

### **Enlightenment and the Remaking of Religion**

I have argued that in the emergent conversations between political philosophers and critical religion scholars, religion's historical trajectory is often taken up in a rather narrow way, namely by focusing on the emergence of a particular definition of religion and the Protestant ideas underlying it. I have argued that it is necessary to shift the focus from the early modern emergence of the category of 'religion' to early modern debates on 'religions'. In Part One of this book I explored how representations of Judaism, Islam, Jews, and Muslims featured in Enlightenment debates on 'religious' topics. My tracing of the characterizations of Judaism and Islam in the work of prominent Enlightenment scholars revealed how the advance of a modern category of religion was connected to the development of a set of ideas regarding these religions' *dangerous* characteristics. These 'religions, plural' became natural 'repositories of fanaticism, intolerance, and danger' sometimes 'saving Christianity by contrast' (Sherwood 2015: 32).

In the first two chapters I focused on *fanaticism*, *legalism* (or political religion), *particularism*, and *materialism* (e.g. ceremonialism, embodied practices, and worldly rewards) and examined how these characteristics were projected onto Judaism and Islam. The four characteristics were seen as strongly intertwined. In **chapter one** I showed that this is apparent, for example, in the thought of Spinoza who argued that the ceremonial and ritual aspects of religion lead to such strong attachments that they prohibit doubts and sound reason, thereby increasing the threat of fanaticism. It comes to the fore in descriptions of Mohammed as an ambitious politician driven by material gains who was able to inspire his fanatical followers. The entanglement is also visible in Voltaire's discussion of Jewish law, which he used not only to explain the Jews' supposedly inflexible and unphilosophical mindset, but also to legitimize their treatment as a nation in eternal opposition to the peoples among whom they lived.

The focus on Enlightenment representations of Judaism and Islam and their adherents – and not on Catholicism with which these ideas were also strongly associated – allowed me to bring into focus how religion interacted with other categories such as race, culture, nationality, ethnicity, and civilization. In the projection of religion's dangerous dimensions onto Judaism and Islam one can see an effort to envision a Europe free from such problems. The ways in which Jews and Muslims, Judaism and Islam, figure in the work of early modern scholars shines a light on their attempts to delineate a European civilizational identity. In their efforts to rethink Christianity as an essentially European faith, scholars struck an ax into the intertwined roots of the three religions that developed in the Near East and that are now often called the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even anti-religious thinkers such as the Baron d'Holbach did not escape this dynamic. In his attempt to imagine a non-religious Europe he characterized the whole of revealed religion as an Eastern and essentially Jewish phenomenon that was foreign to Europeans. In the work of Immanuel Kant, discussed in **chapter two**, the distinction between Orient and Occident also reveals the interconnections existing between the categories of religion, race, and ethnicity. All three categories play a role in establishing Europe, not only as religiously superior, but also as the privileged realm of reason, freedom, and morality. I maintained that in Kant's discussions of Judaism and Islam, one can further find two prominent fears about religion, namely that it can inspire complete subjugation or moral servitude as well as an unrestrained energy which can develop into a revolutionary force. In both cases religion impedes the proper use of reason. We saw that Kant developed his ideals of freedom and autonomy in direct opposition to what he conceived as the heteronomous religion of Judaism.

The historical period examined in this book thus did not solely give rise to a particular, idealized, definition of religion and the religious, but also to a set of ideas about dangerous religiosity; ideas that were used in the securitization of religious groups. Furthermore, early modern scholars construed ethno-religious and racial hierarchies in their attempts to demarcate a European civilization. My account of Enlightenment views on Judaism and Islam in Enlightenment thought shows the persistence of certain theological categories, binaries, and prejudices.

However, as I argued in **chapter three**, a focus on *theological continuity* present in those critiques which trace the Protestant roots of liberal political theory, does not sufficiently illuminate the flexible way such categories were put to use. Conversations between political philosophers and critical religion scholars often display a strong focus on the Christian structures underlying the liberal framework, and more specifically on the Protestant conception of religion this framework relies on. In this dissertation I have maintained that a broader and more context-sensitive account of religion's history within liberal thought allows for a more thorough and critical assessment of liberal political theory on state-religion relationships. I have argued that theological categories always became productive in specific contexts and were used to serve different political interests. While concepts such as fanaticism and enthusiasm have long histories of use in intra-theological disputes, they have been employed to problematize different religious groupings as well as political and epistemological positions. An emphasis on the continuity of theological categories and the focus on the Protestant bias of the liberal framework does little to capture this flexibility in use. Such a perspective, I argued, can further lead to the adoption of essentialist ideas about the nature of different religions as it fails to take notice of the fact that changing historical and political contexts have shaped, and continue to shape, ideas about religious difference. Lastly, a focus on the Protestant definition of religion may also fail to question the religio-secular perspective on social plurality, as it does not expose religion's entanglement with other complex categories – e.g. race, civilization, culture – that are part of the concept's historical trajectory.

The first part of this book explored how, for the articulation of a more expansive genealogy of religion, it is necessary to examine the history of religion's entanglement with the other complex categories mentioned above. Such a genealogy would benefit from further investigation which could follow different pathways. For example, the exploration of the ways in which early modern thought on toleration and religious freedom played out in colonial contexts, and the debates on missionary activities in newly conquered lands (see for example Turner 2011). The genealogy of religion can also be further developed by examining how the different dimensions of 'dangerous religion'

were historically applied to Christian and non-Christian groups, beside Judaism and Islam. Lastly, it requires the investigation of specific historical conflicts over difference as this makes possible the exploration of the social and political contexts in which categories of religion and ideas about religious danger are deployed. Evan Haefeli calls for such research when he claims that topics such as toleration and freedom of religion do not exist as an ‘autonomous topic of study separate from any particular social or cultural context’ (2015: 105).

### **Enlightenment Inheritances in Liberal Political Thought**

In the second part of the book I discussed how this genealogical approach can and should inform contemporary political theory on the place of religion within the modern state. In chapters four and five I traced Enlightenment inheritances in the thought of Habermas, Rawls, and Maclure and Taylor, who have been central figures in shaping the current philosophical debate on the normative questions pertaining to religion’s public presence. I have shown that in their work one can find a range of non-empirical assumptions about the nature of religion and its dangerous characteristics. Habermas, who treats religion as a unique phenomenon, puts these ideas forward in an explicit manner. He portrays religion as something that contains an impenetrable core of truth that exercises dogmatic authority over the believer; as a source of energy that infuses a person’s life as a whole; and as something which through particularistic rites is connected to a ‘thick’ experience of membership. Religious views, for these reasons, are presented as special sources of conflict, or even violence, that can therefore not be part of democratic deliberation in untranslated form.

In the thought of liberal egalitarian scholars such as Rawls and Maclure/Taylor assumptions about religion are more implicit. These authors analogize religion with other beliefs, commitments, and identities as they argue that questions of free exercise and establishment do not solely pertain to religion and *religious* convictions, but also to secular ideas about the good. I have argued that even those liberal egalitarians who do not ‘worry about the category of religion at all’ (Laborde 2020: 68) can still benefit from reflecting on the historical embeddedness of contemporary liberal theory’s treatment of religion. Even though these authors claim not to single out religion, their work contains several contested ideas about the nature of religious conviction. The work of Rawls and that of Maclure and Taylor contains a Protestant understanding of what religion is and what role it plays in people’s lives as they equate religion with matters of ‘conscience’. I further showed that in their work religion is portrayed as comprehensive in scope, and as internally stable and homogeneous. These characteristics play a role in upholding the idea that religious worldviews

leave little room for doubt and compromise, and therefore inevitably clash with competing systems of thought. In the work of these authors we thus not only find ideas about the nature of religion but also about the nature of modern pluralist societies and the conflicts that arise within them. In Rawls' work modern day pluralism mirrors the post-Reformation strife between rival forms of Christianity. In modern society all citizens are thought to have their own conception of the good containing an inaccessible transcendent element. The conflicts between different ideas of the good that characterize modern societies are thus by nature irreconcilable.

In the work of Habermas and Rawls one not only finds general assumptions about the nature of religion, but also claims about specific religious groups. In his discussion of Islam, Habermas claims that this religion must still go through the process of becoming reflexive, a learning process that Judaism and Christianity underwent in the course of the Reformation and Enlightenment that took place in European Early Modernity. Habermas, I have shown, constructs a rigid binary in which a religious citizen is considered either as fully reflexive or as fundamentalist – and holding fanatical claims to truth. Therefore, his portrayal of Islam as non-reflexive presents Muslims as an inherent threat to peaceful deliberation. While Rawls has less to say about specific religious groupings, in his description of Kazanistan, an *idealized* Islamic state, a range of stereotypical characterizations of Islam familiar from the history of Orientalist thought appear. In his description of this imaginary country Rawls connects Islam to despotism, legalism, and the conquest of other peoples.

Through my analysis of the work of these key authors on the topic of state-religion relations in political philosophy, I hope to encourage further investigation into, and unpacking of, assumptions about religion and religions, in the broader field of political theory. Such investigation and reflection should not only focus on implicit ideas about the nature of religion which are part of theoretical accounts, but also examine how such ideas are connected to the way social conflict is conceptualized. A Rawlsian understanding of modern pluralism might influence the governance of contemporary societal conflicts. The questioning of compatibility of Islam with other 'value systems' or 'systems of thought' by contemporary political actors, mentioned in the above, is supported by the Rawlsian idea that conflicts of difference consist primarily of clashes between people's comprehensive doctrines, which are at the core non-negotiable. Unpacking this Rawlsian notion can lead us to interrogate this insurmountability of difference (Balibar 1991). It might further lead to shift some political theoretical attention away from people's supposed convictions, ideas, and doctrines, to a focus on behavior and its compatibility with laws and liberal values.

It is further necessary to look at mainstream political philosophical characterizations of specific religious groups. In the current social and political context, it is especially pertinent to examine the ways in which Islam and Muslims make an appearance in political philosophy, sometimes as seemingly casual examples. Recent work by Murad Idris (2020) and Loubna El Amine (2021) counters the nonchalant ‘footnoting of Islam’ (Almond 2009: 29) by giving in-depth analyses of Rawls’s creation of Kazanistan. Analyses that bring to light the ‘structure of power that produces Rawls’s description of Islam’ which normally ‘goes unremarked’ (Idris 2020: 14) and the ‘sociological, political, and historical’ problems characterizing his account (Amin 2021: 1).

### What Does Religion Do?

Tracing problematic Enlightenment inheritances present in the thought of liberal political philosophers is not the sole aim of this thesis. In the final **chapter six** I argued that reflecting on religion’s historical trajectory should further inspire contemporary theorists to rethink the way they choose the concrete cases of religious governance they engage with, as well as the way in which they engage with them. I have argued this point by discussing the work of Cécile Laborde. In her response to the critical religion challenge she remedies central problems in liberal political theory and develops a theoretical account that does not depend on a specific definition of religion. Even so, I maintained that her work leaves open questions of how to analyze and critique legal and political discourses, practices and institutions which perpetuate prejudicial characterizations of religious groups and their members, reproduce ethno-religious hierarchies or rely on contested notions of religious danger.

Taking seriously the critique of the historically constructed nature of the liberal account of religion, I argued, entails a reflection on the ideas about dangerous forms of religiosity and the ethno-religious hierarchies that were part of this construction. For contemporary political theorists this would entail a more extensive engagement with an area of policy and political discourse in which ethno-religious hierarchies and the specific constructs of ‘dangerous religion’ play a central role, namely what is now often broadly designated as the ‘securitization of Islam’ (Buijs 2009; Cesari 2010; Fox and Akbaba 2015). Political theory, I argued, needs a more in-depth reflection on how states determine whether religion is a threat to public order and security. It should critically interrogate state discourses on orthodoxy, extremism, fundamentalism, and radicalization as historically produced, and examine how potentially prejudicial notions of dangerous religiosity often come to play a role in state treatment of these topics. I also maintained that liberal political philosophers should consider the broad

variety of ways in which religion and religious difference are *politicized* within the liberal state, for example in discourses on state-religion relationships, but also in discourses on immigration and integration. This would entail a stronger focus on the concrete social and political contexts in which religious difference becomes salient by asking what it *does* in the governance and *understanding* of social conflicts, and how it interacts with ideas about nationality, race, civilization, and ethnicity.

This last point leads me back to one of the difficulties that might inhibit a productive conversation between critical genealogy and liberal political philosophy: namely the notion that a genealogy of concepts has limited critical potential due to the ‘genetic fallacy’ committed by critical genealogists. In the introduction to this dissertation I countered Jean Cohen who questioned the use of a genealogical method of critiquing ‘the modern secular state and political liberalism’ (2018: 218). A concept’s tainted history, Cohen argued, does not invalidate its current use. Normative philosophical principles should instead be challenged on their own grounds. However, many genealogies, including the ones put forward in this book, do not aim to *invalidate* liberal principles and the concepts whose histories they trace, let alone ‘liberalism’ as a whole. Instead, the genealogies developed in this thesis aim to provide insight into the productive dimensions of our concepts and representations by examining the historical context of their emergence and development. This allows for a more critical approach to the ways these representations are used within concrete political contexts, and the work they do within dilemmas of governance that arise from these contexts.

However, pointing out that categories, concepts, and representations have a *productive or regulatory* dimension still might not be perceived as a sufficiently fruitful pathway to a dialogue with liberal political philosophy. In her discussion of the realist branch of the critical religion school Laborde states: ‘the fact that regulation of religion is normative in a Foucauldian sense [...] does not mean that it is impermissible in a liberal normative sense’ (Laborde 2017: 37). I agree with Laborde that normative standards are needed to distinguish better from worse, or oppressive from non-oppressive, exercises of power. However, in theorizing the relations between religion and the state, liberal political philosophers tend to focus on the legitimacy of some forms of coercion while overlooking others. What I have argued for in this dissertation is a move away from political theory’s favorite hard cases, which can be neatly divided into questions of freedom of religion and questions of establishment, and to shift our gaze towards the concrete political contexts in which such questions arise, and on those aspects of the relationship between the state and ‘religion’ that do not fit the freedom/establishment framework. I have urged for a broader perspective taking into

account the different roles religions play in the way liberal democratic states address, both legally and politically, conflicts over difference; for example, by focusing on the ways government discourses and policy narratives establish religion as a dominant faultline. This is especially relevant as European states in particular have increasingly focused on religion – or more specifically on Islam – as society’s main diversity challenge. Such a perspective puts into sharper focus the many different regulative dimensions of ‘religion’ and its associated categories and representations, and thereby opens up the possibility for normatively assessing them. In the remainder of this conclusion I will share some brief reflections on what this perspective means for the way political philosophers can engage with the contemporary regulation of Islamic religious symbols and practices, as discussed above.

### **Regulating Religious Symbols**

Here I want to revisit Laborde’s claim that the contemporary regulation of Muslim symbols and practices – and the striking difference in the way Christian counterparts are regulated by European states – does not in itself ‘invalidate the theory of liberal secularism’ (2020: 58). I believe she is correct to argue so. However, the question of whether such regulations are indicative of a problem with liberal theory deserves a more nuanced answer. The regulation of Islamic symbols and practices cannot be fully explained by pointing out that national and European courts employ a majoritarian or Christian bias incompatible with the theory of liberal secularism which can be considered truly religiously neutral. An examination of the political and legal discourses on the regulation of Islamic practices reveals that such regulation is often justified based on a range of assumptions about religious danger, as well assumptions on the nature of Islam and Christianity. Assumptions, I have shown in this dissertation, that are part of the history of liberal thought. It is necessary to recognize such assumptions ‘constructed in the course of European history’ and to be on the alert for ‘their return, transformed, interconnected, political as they always were’ (Jansen and Meer 2020: 8). Political theorists should take special note of the ways in which characterizations of religious dangers and ethno-religious hierarchies are presently mobilized in the securitization of Islam.

In the previous chapter I briefly introduced the *Lautsi* case in which an Italian parent challenged the mandatory presence of the crucifix in the classrooms of public schools. Various political philosophers have debated whether the form of religious establishment the presence of the Christian cross entails is legitimate from a liberal perspective. I argued that it is important to also examine the way the Italian state defended the mandatory presence of the symbol. In this

defense it was argued that the Christian cross, the symbol of a religion that by its very nature is universal, might play a role in transmitting liberal and democratic values to those pupils from outside the European union in order that they can be taught to be open to diversity and to reject fundamentalism. This was argued to be especially important as the ‘exclusion of the unbeliever’ (*Lautsi and others v. Italy* 2011) is central to all religions *except* Christianity. The presence of the cross might therefore actually prevent a clash of cultures that could otherwise take place in pluralist classrooms. A very similar argument was made by conservative German *Länder* in defense of explicitly permitting Christian symbols while prohibiting Islamic ones. The German courts ‘candidly equate Christianity with democracy’ (Mancini 2014:125) and present the cross as not *religious* in nature but as part of Christian-occidental culture (ibid: 120). Additionally, in the political and legal discourses on the regulation of Islamic practices, such as the prohibition of the *hijab* in schools and other public places, one can find a range of familiar ideas about religious danger used to characterize Islam and its practices. In an overview of such laws and their justifications, Mancini shows that Islam is continually depicted as a ‘value-system’ incompatible with liberal democracy (ibid: 115). The *hijab* is further characterized as a political symbol; a denial of equality between the sexes (Mancini 2014:120); a source of strife; and a means to separate pupils from the common rules, thereby disrupting the tranquility of school life (ibid: 118).

In assessing the normative legitimacy of both the regulation and establishment of religious symbols, political philosophers have too often abstracted from the political contexts of which such cases are part, and the social and legal discourses employed to justify policy on the regulation of symbols and practices. In the *Lautsi* case religion is not only politicized when the state attaches itself to a majority religion by hanging a cross on a classroom wall, but also by the way the Italian court establishes a connection between Christianity and liberal democracy, the manner in which it problematizes non-European religions as exclusionary in nature, and by its assumption that the cross can and should be employed to instruct against fundamentalism and prevent civil strife from taking place in religiously and culturally diverse classrooms. Not only the presence of the cross itself, but these discourses also have an effect on the civil standing of citizens and thereby on the inclusivity of the state. In the regulation of Muslim dress, it is not only the ban on wearing a *hijab* in public contexts which effects the state’s inclusivity, but also the way in which states and courts characterize Islam and its symbols as clashing with liberal democratic principles, and the way in which the *hijab* is portrayed as inherently political, as a source of conflict and so-called communitarianism, as is especially the case in the French context.

Religion is politicized not only in ways that fit the rubric of establishment, but also in the manner in which state actors identify and debate societal problems, and establish religious difference as a central faultline; the way they discuss certain religious traditions and their practices; and by the categories used in legitimizing policy. Political theorists should thus not merely analyze a symbol and its religious meaning to then assess whether regulation or establishment is legitimate; they should engage more thoroughly with the political contexts and discourses in which conflicts over such symbols take place.

Returning to the Swiss minaret ban discussed at the beginning of this conclusion, many political philosophers analyzed and criticized the legitimacy of such a prohibition. The focus of analysis, however, was often the question of whether a ‘historic nation’ has the ‘right to shape public space in a way that reflects its identity and to transmit that identity over time’ (Miller 2016: 454; see also Perez 2020; Thompson 2019); or, more broadly, can preference be given to the majority religion in the shaping of state-religion institutions as long as the rights of minorities are upheld? In David Miller’s discussion of the case he explicitly separates this question from the campaign in favor of the ban, which he acknowledges contained ‘Islamophobic elements’ (Miller 2016: 438). ‘By treating the referendum as merely an opportunity for those opposed to Islam to show their distaste’, Miller states, one can avoid confronting the real issues about identity and control over public space that the Swiss debate over minarets raises’ (ibid).<sup>78</sup> However, one cannot understand the effect of the minaret ban on the social standing of Muslim citizens by detaching the ban on the building of minarets from the political context which brought the ban into being. The campaign emphasizes the incompatibility of Islam and core democratic values; it securitizes Muslims by describing Islam as a political religion with the intention to impose an alternative legal order; and it characterizes Islam as foreign by describing the minaret as a symbol of a ‘conquering power’.

The lens of ‘majority’ or ‘Christian bias’ is insufficient for understanding the incidence of this ban, as well as other instances of religious securitization and their legitimation in self-proclaimed liberal states. A reflection on liberal thought’s historical involvement in the creation of ethno-religious hierarchies, and on the histories of the political use of fanaticism and ‘dangerous religiosity’, not only helps in comprehending how this particular minaret ban came into being, but might help in challenging such politicization of religious difference in the future.

<sup>78</sup> Miller elaborates: ‘[I]n politics defensible positions, whether of the right or of the left, can always be supported by individual persons for indefensible reasons, and it would be reductive to suppose that

any political decision that burdens Muslims at the expense of other citizens, as this one did, must be dismissed as stemming merely from religious prejudice’ (Miller 2016: 438).



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**De Gevaarlijke Religies van het Liberalisme.  
Verlichtingserfenissen in de Politieke Theorie.**

In 2009 werd in Zwitserland een verbod op de bouw van minaretten aangenomen. Zevenenvijftig procent van de Zwitserse kiezers steunde het voorstel in een volksreferendum op initiatief van de Zwitserse Volkspartij (SVP) en de Federale Democratische Unie (EDU). De minaret, zo betoogden SVP-politici, moest gezien worden als een voorbode van de invoering van de sharia en een symbool van politieke macht, maar ook als een en als een provocatie van fundamentele mensenrechten. Campagnevoerders beschreven minaretten als een Islamitisch symbool van de overwinning op veroverd grondgebied. Campagneposters toonden een vrouw in een chador omringd door op raketten lijkende minaretten die de Zwitserse vlag doorboren.

In deze dissertatie laat ik zien dat dit soort representaties van de islam – als een legalistisch systeem dat politieke doelen en gewelddadige verovering nastreeft; en als een systeem dat lijnrecht ingaat tegen ‘Europese’ grondrechten, zoals die van gendergelijkheid – een lange geschiedenis hebben. Tijdens mijn onderzoek naar de manier waarop Verlichtingsdenkers het jodendom, de islam en het christendom karakteriseerden en deze godsdiensten gebruikten om de grenzen van een Europese beschaving af te bakenen, was het moeilijk om niet steeds parallellen te zien met het hedendaagse publieke en politieke debat. Want ‘in heel Europa claimen uiteenlopende partijen en bewegingen opnieuw de categorie religie om grenzen te trekken tussen wie wel en wie niet tot het gemeenschappelijke Europese thuis mag behoren’ (Bialasiewicz en Gentile 2019: 1). In veel Europese staten – maar ook in toenemende mate in de VS – doen politici een beroep op christelijke of joods-christelijke waarden om zowel de Europese als de nationale beschavingsidentiteit te karakteriseren. Bovendien is het in twijfel trekken van de verenigbaarheid van de islam met Europese of westerse waarden – gedefinieerd als seculier, liberaal-democratisch, of joods-christelijk – van de politieke marges naar de mainstream verschoven. In veel Europese landen is verder sprake van een toenemende regulering van moslimpraktijken en symbolen, zoals de hijab, de boerka en de minaret.

Men kan zich afvragen of deze ontwikkelingen die plaatsvinden in zelfbenoemde liberale staten indicatief zijn voor een probleem binnen de liberale politieke theorie die zich bezighoudt met de relatie tussen religie en de staat. Vragen over religieuze vrijheid en de relatie tussen kerk en de staat hebben een centrale plek in de hedendaagse politieke filosofie en theorie. Mag de overheid religieus onderwijs financieren? Horen religieuze argumenten thuis in de politieke arena? Mag een politieagent een hoofddoek dragen? Debatten over deze vragen berusten gewoonlijk op de veronderstelling dat je een ‘seculier’ en een ‘religieus’ – of sacraal – domein kan onderscheiden waartussen een bepaalde relatie tot stand zou moeten worden gebracht. Er kunnen echter vragen gesteld worden over de stabiliteit, universaliteit en analytische waarde van de begrippen ‘religie’ en ‘secularisme’, en over het exacte onderscheid tussen deze twee sferen.

Politiek filosofen die zich bezighouden met de verhouding tussen religie en de staat zijn pas sinds kort begonnen na te denken over hun gebruik van het begrip ‘religie’. Zij doen dat in antwoord op verschillende kritieken die erop wijzen dat de liberale theorie het begrip ‘religie’ op een onbevredigende en eenzijdige manier invult. Veel critici benadrukken dat het liberale denken doordrongen is van een impliciet protestantse opvatting over wat religie eigenlijk is. De manier waarop liberale politiek filosofen religie begrijpen en behandelen, is volgens

hen sterk beïnvloed door hun gebruik van een specifieke definitie van religie als iets dat ‘privé, vrijwillig, individueel, tekstueel en geloofd’ is (Sullivan 2005: 8). Deze kritieken vestigen de aandacht op het historische tijdspad waarin een moderne opvatting van religie vorm kreeg. Ze proberen daarmee aan te tonen dat ogenschijnlijk neutrale concepten die aan de politieke theorie ten grondslag liggen, in feite het product zijn van een specifiek West-Europees historisch en politiek traject. Reflectie op het begrip religie heeft dus geleid tot belangstelling voor de ontstaansgeschiedenis van dat begrip en die van verwante liberale principes als ‘tolerantie’, ‘vrijheid van godsdienst’ en ‘scheiding van kerk en staat’. Degenen die de historische wortels willen onderzoeken van dergelijke concepten, die zo centraal staan in de hedendaagse liberale theorie en praktijk, voeren deze vaak terug tot het werk van Europese Verlichtingsdenkers. Dit kan worden verklaard door het feit dat de Verlichting vaak wordt gekarakteriseerd als de periode waarin deze centrale liberale principes voor het eerst werden geformuleerd én als het tijdperk waarin de moderne categorie ‘religie’ werd ‘uitgevonden’.

Het doel van dit boek is tweeledig: het draagt bij aan de verdere historiseren van het begrip ‘religie’ en formuleert daarnaast een antwoord op de vraag hoe zo’n historische benadering het werk van hedendaagse politiek filosofen zou kunnen moeten informeren. Daarmee levert mijn dissertatie een bijdrage aan een gesprek tussen kritische genealogie en de liberale politieke filosofie die zich bezighoudt met normatieve vragen over de plaats van religie binnen de liberale staat. In het eerste deel van dit boek heb ik zelf een genealogische benadering ontwikkeld door te onderzoeken hoe het opnieuw vorm krijgen van ‘religie’ in het Europese Verlichtingsdenken verbonden was met representaties van het jodendom, de islam, joden en moslims. Dit stelde me in staat de aandacht te verleggen van de ontwikkeling van een protestantse definitie van religie, naar de historische constructie van ‘religieuze verschillen’ en de manier waarop ideeën over dit soort verschillen politiek relevant worden. Vroegmoderne discussies over jodendom en islam laten zien dat het vorm krijgen van de moderne categorie ‘religie’ hand in hand ging met de ontwikkeling van ideeën over de gevaarlijke kenmerken van religie. Deze ideeën werden flexibel ingezet bij het creëren van hiërarchieën tussen verschillende religies en bij het problematiseren en securitiseren van specifieke groepen gelovigen. De reden om het Verlichtingsdenken over jodendom en islam centraal te stellen, en niet het denken over kerkelijke autoriteiten of het katholicisme – de belangrijkste objecten van kritiek van veel Verlichtingsdenkers – is dat de discussies over islam en jodendom helpen om de verbanden tussen ‘religie’ en andere complexe categorieën bloot te leggen. Door te kijken naar de rol van het jodendom, het christendom en de islam in het

werk van Verlichtingsdenkers kan ik niet alleen laten zien welke dimensies van religie als problematisch of gevaarlijk werden beschouwd, maar ook licht werpen op de manier waarop de categorie ‘religie’ verstrengeld is geraakt met begrippen als etniciteit, cultuur en ras, en hoe zij een rol speelt bij het afbakenen van ‘de’ Europese beschaving.

In het tweede deel van het boek bespreek ik de consequenties van deze historische benadering voor de hedendaagse liberale politieke theorievorming. Hedendaagse politiek filosofen die reflecteren op hun eigen conceptualisering van ‘religie’, doen dat vaak, zo stel ik, op basis van een te beperkte kijk op het historische traject van dit begrip. Dit heeft geleid tot een zinvolle reflectie op de mogelijke protestantse wortels van liberale benaderingen en definities van religie; historische wortels die kunnen leiden tot het benadelen van religies die slecht passen in de mal van het Protestantisme. Toch maakt een breder perspectief op de historische ontwikkeling van ‘religie’ binnen het liberale denken, zoals gepresenteerd in dit boek, een grondigere en kritischere beoordeling mogelijk van de hedendaagse liberale omgang met religie. Het Zwitserse minarettenverbod en de andere ontwikkelingen die hierboven worden geschetst kunnen onvoldoende worden verklaard en bevraagd doormiddel van kritiek op de ‘protestantse vooringenomenheid’ van het liberale raamwerk. Een zinvolle reflectie op de historisch geconstrueerde aard van de liberale benadering van religie houdt in dat ook moet worden nagedacht over historisch gegroeide ideeën over problematische en gevaarlijke vormen van religiositeit, en naar de manieren waarop deze ideeën werden, en wórdten, geprojecteerd op groepen mensen en religieuze tradities. Zowel publieke als filosofische debatten over religie zouden er baat bij hebben deze historische erfenissen te erkennen. Dit is van bijzonder belang in een hedendaagse context van politieke discussies over ‘de gevaren van religie’ waarbij de aandacht vooral uitgaat naar de aanwezigheid van moslims in Europa en de Verenigde Staten; discussie die worden aangewakkerd door internationale conflicten, terroristische aanslagen, en de politisering van migratie en integratie. Hier onder geef ik in meer detail weer hoe dit argument in mijn dissertatie boek wordt opgebouwd.

### **De Verlichting en de Gevaren van Religie**

In het eerste deel van dit boek bespreek ik verschillende representaties van jodendom en islam in het werk van Verlichtingsfilosofen. In hoofdstuk een behandel ik vier dimensies van religie die door vroegmoderne denkers vaak werden geproblematiseerd, en laat zien hoe deze religieuze kenmerken werden geprojecteerd op jodendom en islam. Ik richt me op de thema’s fanatisme, legalisme (of politieke religie), particularisme (exclusieve gerichtheid op de

eigen gemeenschap) en materialisme (de nadruk op symbolen, ceremonies, en belichaamde praktijken). Al deze thema's spelen, zo laat ik in latere hoofdstukken zien, nog steeds een rol in hedendaagse debatten over de plaats van religie binnen de liberale staat.

Deze 'gevaarlijke' kenmerken werden door Verlichtingsdenkers gezien als nauw met elkaar verweven. Dit komt bijvoorbeeld naar voren in het denken van Spinoza, die stelde dat de ceremoniële en rituele aspecten van religie tot zulke sterke overtuigingen leiden dat zij twijfel en gezond verstand in de weg staan, waardoor de dreiging van fanatisme toeneemt. Het blijkt ook uit verschillende vroegmoderne beschrijvingen van de profeet Mohammed als een ambitieus politicus, gedreven door materieel gewin, die in staat was zijn fanatieke volgelingen te inspireren. De verstremgeling is ook zichtbaar in Voltaires bespreking van de Joodse wet, die hij niet alleen gebruikte om de vermeende onbuigzame en onfilosofische mentaliteit van de Joden te verklaren, maar ook om hun slechte behandeling te legitimeren als een natie in eeuwig verzet tegen de volkeren waartussen zij leefden.

De rol die joden en moslims, jodendom en islam, spelen in het werk van Verlichtingsfilosofen werpt een licht op hun wens om een Europese beschavingsidentiteit af te bakenen. In hun pogingen om het christendom te herdefiniëren als een in wezen Europees geloof, zetten veel denkers een bijl in de verstremgelde wortels van de drie religies die zich in het Nabije Oosten ontwikkelden en die nu vaak de Abrahamitische religies worden genoemd: Jodendom, Christendom, en Islam. Door de problemen en gevaren van religie te projecteren op het jodendom en de islam trachtte men zich een Europa voor te stellen dat vrij is van dergelijke problemen. Zelfs antireligieuze denkers zoals Baron d'Holbach ontsnapten niet aan deze dynamiek. In zijn poging om zich een niet-religieus Europa voor te stellen karakteriseerde hij hele idee van geopenbaarde godsdienst als een oosters en in wezen joods fenomeen dat vreemd was aan de Europeanen. In het werk van Immanuel Kant, besproken in hoofdstuk twee, toont het door hem gemaakte onderscheid tussen Oriënt en Occident de onderlinge interactie tussen ideeën over religie, ras en etniciteit. Alle drie de categorieën spelen een rol bij het positioneren van Europa, niet alleen als religieus superieur, maar ook als het bevoorrechte rijk van de rede, de vrijheid en de moraal. Ik stel dat in Kants besprekingen van het jodendom en de islam twee prominente angsten over religie zichtbaar worden: het idee dat religie kan aanzetten tot onderwerping en morele slavernij, maar ook tot een ongebreidelde energie die kan uitgroeien tot een revolutionaire kracht. In beide gevallen belemmert religie het juiste gebruik van de rede. Ik laat zien dat Kant zijn idealen van vrijheid en autonomie ontwikkelde in directe oppositie tot wat

hij beschouwde als de heteronome religie van het Judaïsme. Kants opvattingen over jodendom en islam, en zijn ideeën over niet-Europese volkeren, vervullen een duidelijke functie in zijn filosofische systeem en kunnen daarom niet zomaar worden afgedaan als gangbare vooroordelen.

Hoewel de bespreking van het vroegmoderne denken in de eerste twee hoofdstukken tot doel heeft een reeks theologische erfenissen aan het licht te brengen, zijn deze niet beperkt tot een ‘protestantse’ definitie van religie. Ze omvatten ze ook een reeks opposities (wet-geest, geest-lichaam, gedachte-actie, goddelijke en civiele verplichting) en ideeën over fanatisme en enthousiasme. De nadruk op theologische continuïteit of protestantse vooringenomenheid in de liberale politieke theorie gaat, zo betoog ik, voorbij aan de flexibele manieren waarop deze concepten worden gebruikt. In hoofdstuk drie wijs ik op drie risico’s van kritiek gericht op de continuïteit van theologische categorieën. Ik doe dit door werk van John Locke over tolerantie onder de loep te nemen. De kritiek op het liberale kader die zich concentreert op het blootleggen van de christelijke of protestantse wortels ervan, brengt het risico met zich mee dat essentialistische ideeën over de aard van verschillende religies worden bestendigd. Een monolithische presentatie van ‘de’ genealogie van religie die pretendeert dat hedendaagse liberale ideeën over bijvoorbeeld religie, seculariteit en tolerantie in feite ‘christelijk’ of ‘protestants’ zijn, maskeert daarnaast het belang van politieke en historische context. Theologische categorieën, zo laat ik zien, worden steeds productief (gemaakt) in specifieke contexten en om verschillende politieke belangen te dienen. Ten slotte kan een focus op de protestantse definitie van religie er ook toe leiden dat het religieus-seculiere perspectief op sociale pluraliteit niet bevraagd wordt omdat het de verstrengeling van religie met andere complexe categorieën – b.v. ras, beschaving, cultuur – die ook deel uitmaken van het historische traject van het concept, niet aan het licht brengt.

### **Erfenissen van de Verlichting in het Liberale Politieke Denken**

In het tweede deel van het boek bespreek ik hoe de genealogische benadering uit de eerste hoofdstukken de hedendaagse politieke theorie over de plaats van religie binnen de moderne staat kan en moet informeren. In de hoofdstukken vier en vijf traceer ik de erfenissen van de Verlichting in het denken van Habermas, Rawls, en Maclure & Taylor; denkers die allen een centrale rol hebben (gehad) in het vormgeven van het huidige filosofische debat over de publieke aanwezigheid van religie. Ik laat zien dat in hun werk een reeks niet-empirische aannames over de aard van religie en haar gevaarlijke kenmerken aanwezig is. Habermas, die religie als een uniek fenomeen behandelt, brengt deze ideeën op een expliciete manier naar voren. Hij presenteert religie als iets

dat een ondoordringbare kern van waarheidsclaims bevat en dogmatisch gezag uitoefent over de gelovige; als een bron van energie die iemands leven als geheel doordrenkt; en als iets dat via particularistische rituelen inherent verbonden is met een ervaring van groepslidmaatschap. Religieuze opvattingen worden door hem om deze redenen voorgesteld als een bijzondere bron van conflict, of zelfs geweld. Religieuze argumenten kunnen daarom in onvertaalde vorm geen deel uitmaken van democratische beraadslaging.

In het denken van liberaal egalitaire denkers als Rawls en Maclure/Taylor zijn de veronderstellingen over religie meer impliciet. In tegenstelling tot Habermas zijn deze denkers van mening dat religieuze overtuigingen niet moeten worden gezien als iets unieks. De categorie van wat door religieuze vrijheid wordt beschermd, wordt uitgebreid door religie te vergelijken met andere seculiere opvattingen van het goede. Ik betoog dat zelfs deze denkers die zich 'helemaal niet druk maken over de categorie religie' (Laborde 2020: 68) er toch baat bij kunnen hebben om na te denken over de historische inbedding van de manier waarop de hedendaagse liberale theorie religie behandelt. Al beweren deze auteurs dat ze religie niet als iets uitzonderlijks behandelen, toch bevat hun werk verschillende omstreden ideeën over de aard van religieuze overtuigingen. Het werk van Rawls en dat van Maclure en Taylor rust ten eerste op een protestantse opvatting over wat religie is en welke rol het speelt in het leven van mensen. Zij beschouwen religie als een zaak van individuele, gewetensvolle overtuiging en zien daarmee de gemeenschappelijke, habituele, belichaamde aspecten van godsdienst over het hoofd. Verder laat ik zien dat in hun werk religie wordt beschreven als alomvattend in reikwijdte, en als intern stabiel en homogeen. Deze kenmerken spelen een rol bij het in stand houden van het idee dat religieuze wereldbeelden in het bijzonder, weinig ruimte laten voor twijfel en compromissen en daarom onvermijdelijk botsen met alternatieve denksystemen. De nadruk op religies als samenhangende en complete waardesystemen met een ondoordringbare transcendente kern leidt ertoe dat de auteurs de ruimte voor conflicten binnen religie minimaliseren en het idee van de onverzoenlijkheid van 'concurrerende' religies benadrukken. In het werk van deze auteurs vinden we dus niet alleen ideeën over de aard van religie, maar ook over de aard van moderne pluralistische samenlevingen en de conflicten die daarbinnen ontstaan. In het werk van Rawls weerspiegelt het moderne pluralisme de strijd tussen rivaliserende vormen van het christendom na de Reformatie. In de moderne samenleving worden alle burgers geacht hun eigen opvatting van het goede te hebben, een opvatting die een ontoegankelijk transcendent element bevat. De conflicten tussen verschillende opvattingen van het goede die kenmerkend zijn voor moderne samenlevingen zijn volgens Rawls dus van nature onverzoenlijk.

In het werk van Habermas en Rawls vindt men niet alleen algemene veronderstellingen over de aard van religie, maar ook beweringen over specifieke religieuze groepen. In zijn bespreking van de islam zegt Habermas dat deze religie nog een leerproces moet doormaken, een leerproces dat het jodendom en het christendom in de loop van de Reformatie en de Verlichting hebben doorgemaakt. Habermas, zo laat ik zien, construeert een rigide binair systeem waarin een religieuze burger ofwel als volledig reflexief wordt beschouwd ofwel als fundamentalistisch – met fanatieke aanspraken op de waarheid. Zijn karakterisering van ‘de’ Islam als een niet-reflexieve religie, leidt daarom tot het idee dat Moslims een inherente bedreiging vormen voor vreedzame democratische deliberatie. Rawls heeft weliswaar minder te zeggen over specifieke religieuze groeperingen, maar in zijn beschrijving van Kazanistan, een ‘geïdealiseerde’ islamitische staat, duikt een reeks stereotiepe karakterisering van de islam op die we kennen uit de geschiedenis van het oriëntalistische denken. In zijn beschrijving van dit denkbeeldige land verbindt Rawls de islam met despotisme, legalisme en de verovering van andere volkeren. Het is noodzakelijk de gangbare politiek-filosofische karakterisering van specifieke religieuze groepen verder te analyseren. Juist in de huidige sociale en politieke context is het bijzonder relevant om de manieren te onderzoeken waarop de islam en moslims in de politieke filosofie opduiken, soms als schijnbaar terloopse voorbeelden.

### **Wat Doet Religie?**

In het hoofdstuk zes ga ik tenslotte nader in op de vraag wat een bredere en meer contextgevoelige uiteenzetting van het historische traject van ‘religie’ kan betekenen voor normatieve politiek theoretici die zich bezighouden met de plaats van religie binnen de staat. Ik stel dat theoretici die nadenken over de historische inbedding van het liberale denken over religie verder moeten kijken dan ‘protestantse erfenissen’ en de ontwikkeling van de moderne definitie van religie. Zij zouden ook de historische verstrengeling van het liberale denken met etnisch-religieuze hiërarchieën in acht moeten nemen en moeten reflecteren de geschiedenis van het politieke gebruik van ‘fanatisme’ en ‘religieus gevaar’. Ik beargumenteer dit aan de hand van Cécile Laborde’s recente benadering van religie en de liberale staat. Ik richt me daarbij op de manier waarop haar theorie is geformuleerd in reactie op wat zij omschrijft als ‘de kritische religie-uitdaging’, kritieken ontwikkeld door een gevarieerde groep academici die wijst op de ‘onbepaaldheid en inadequaatheid van de liberale constructie van religie zelf’ (Laborde 2017: 14). In *Liberalism's Religion* (2017) heroverweegt Laborde zorgvuldig de plaats van religie binnen de liberale politieke theorie en formuleert ze een alternatieve benadering die niet steunt op historisch geconstrueerde

veronderstellingen over gevaarlijke religiositeit of afhankelijk is van een bepaalde definitie van religie. Toch betoog ik dat haar boek nog steeds een te beperkte weergave van de kritische religie-uitdaging presenteert, en om die reden bepaalde vragen openlaat; vragen over hoe politieke praktijken, vertogen en instituties die doordrongen zijn van etnisch-religieuze hiërarchieën, en die steunen op betwiste ideeën over gevaarlijke religiositeit, of vooroordelen over bepaalde religies, geanalyseerd en bekritiseerd kunnen worden.

Om de kritiek op het historisch geconstrueerde karakter van het liberale religiebegrip serieus te nemen, moet worden nagedacht over de ideeën over gevaarlijke vormen van religiositeit en de etnisch-religieuze hiërarchieën die deel uitmaakten van deze constructie. Voor hedendaagse politieke theoretici zou dit een uitgebreidere reflectie inhouden op beleid en politieke discours waarin etnisch-religieuze hiërarchieën en de specifieke constructen van ‘gevaarlijke religie’ een centrale rol spelen: het domein wat nu vaak breed wordt aangeduid als de securitisering van islam. De politieke theorie, zo betoog ik, heeft behoefte aan een meer diepgaande reflectie op de manieren waarop staten bepalen of religie een bedreiging vormt voor de openbare orde en veiligheid. Juist in dit beleidsdomein en in discourses over orthodoxie, extremisme, fundamentalisme en radicalisering kunnen potentieel bevooroordeelde ideeën over gevaarlijke religiositeit een rol spelen. Ik stel ook dat politiek filosofen zich zouden moeten buigen over de grote verscheidenheid aan manieren waarop religie en religieuze verschillen binnen de liberale staat worden gepolitiseerd. Niet alleen in discussies over de relatie tussen staat en religie, maar ook in vertogen over immigratie en integratie. Dit betekent dat er meer aandacht moet komen voor de concrete sociale en politieke contexten waarin religieus verschil relevant wordt, door te vragen wat het doet met het bestuur en het begrip van sociale conflicten, en hoe het in wisselwerking treedt met ideeën over nationaliteit, ras, beschaving en etniciteit.



## Dankwoord

Promoveren is soms eenzaam, maar meestal eigenlijk niet. En dat komt door de mensen die ik nu ga noemen en bedanken.

Allereerst mijn promotor Yolande Jansen. Veel dank voor het bedenken en opzetten van ons onderzoeksproject (daarvoor ook zeer veel dank aan Thijl). Het is heel fijn en bijzonder om begeleid te worden door iemand die zelf zo veel kennis heeft, maar ook zo open staat voor de ideeën van anderen. Dank voor de vrijheid en het vertrouwen. Onze gesprekken waren altijd waardevol want ook in een warrige reeks gedachten zie jij de lijnen van een argument. Ook Michiel Leezenberg wil ik hartelijk bedanken voor zijn bereidheid om copromotor te zijn en mijn werk van commentaar te voorzien.

NWO financierde ons project *Critique of Religion and the Framing of Jews and Muslims in Public Debate and Political Theory*. Deze steun zorgde niet alleen voor de ruimte om me toe te leggen op onderzoek, maar bood ook de mogelijkheid om workshops en conferenties te organiseren en te bezoeken. De ontmoetingen die daardoor mogelijk werden waren heel waardevol. Ik heb geprofiteerd van de ideeën van, en uitwisselingen met, Anya Topolski, Tariq Modood, Nawal Mustafa, Aurélie Bardon, Élise Rouméas, Simon Thomson, Veit Bader, Martijn de Koning, Schirin Amir-Moazami, Yvonne Sherwood, Maleiha Malik, Sune Lægaard, Roland Pierik en vele anderen.

De filosofieafdeling van de UvA, en in het bijzonder de Philosophy and Public Affairs groep, boden een huis aan mijn promotietraject. De rommelige zolderkamer aan de Oude Turfmarkt (toen met Eva, Eva en Gijs) en de Colloquia op woensdag zorgden voor de inspiratie en uitwisseling van ideeën die een promovendus nodig heeft. Ook de ondersteuning van ASCA, en de fantastische schrijfretraites van het OZSW mogen niet onbenoemd blijven. Inmiddels staat mijn bureau alweer een tijd in het iets minder romantische E-gebouw van Roeterseiland. Gelukkig voel ik me daar bij PPLE ook zeer op mijn plek en gaat mijn dank uit naar de zeer gevarieerde groep collega's waarmee ik de afgelopen jaren heb samengewerkt. I also want to thank my students for their eager participation and readiness to share original and insightful ideas. I have admired your tenacity and your willingness and ability to remain engaged and interested during the last year and a half in which we were all doomed to zoom. Even though my teaching responsibilities have not speeded up my PhD project in the slightest please know that you have significantly contributed to my sanity and provided much joy during the finalization of my thesis.

Voor het daadwerkelijk afmaken van dit boek gaat mijn dank uit naar Marc Cooper voor het zeer zorgvuldig redigeren van mijn Engels en naar Mahtab Zamanifar die er eigenhandig voor zorgde dat dit boek er zo mooi uit ziet.

I also want to thank my committee for their willingness to evaluate this thesis and engage with my work. It is such a pleasure to be able to step out of the strange (and somewhat isolated) world of PhD finalization – focused on moving comma's and getting rid of double spaces – to discuss and exchange ideas. Irena Rosenthal and Annelien de Dijn, thank you for providing valuable comments on previous work; Christoph Baumgartner thank you for your continued interest in, and support for, our project. A special thanks to Cécile Laborde for her willingness to travel to Amsterdam (as yet unclear whether the pandemic will allow it), for treasured academic advice during a Konstanz heatwave and for your thoughtful work on liberalism's religion which was a great inspiration for this dissertation.

En dan natuurlijk mijn paranimfen. Lieve Floor, tijdens onze studies ontdekten we denk ik min of meer tegelijkertijd hoe interessant ideeën zijn en ook dat het mogelijk is juist die te bestuderen (voor die ontdekking dank ik ook Marcel Maussen en Robert van der Veen die mij als bevlogen docenten kennis lieten maken met politieke filosofie én er ook voor zorgden dat ik mezelf ging zien als een potentiële promovendus). De tijd dat we elke avond

in de UB of het PCH papers zaten te schrijven (of dilemma's bedachten, of Mattijs Pekelharing) is al een tijd voorbij, maar daar kwam een heleboel voor in de plaats. Je bent enorm goed in vriendschap. Dank voor al je initiatieven – van etentjes tot wandelvakanties – en je grote gastvrijheid en zorgzaamheid.

Lieve Eke, last-minute paranimf, maar een hele goede vriend en bron van steun tijdens dit promotietraject (en daar buiten) was je natuurlijk al lang. Onze tripjes naar de Kemphaan (waar de beste stukken geschreven werden) en onze samenwerkdagen hebben het afmaken van dit boek veel leuker en makkelijker gemaakt. Dat ik altijd kan aanhaken in jouw vrolijke gezin en altijd op je kan rekenen, maakt je voor mij heel belangrijk.

Lieve Matthea, wat een geluk dat wij samen in dit project terecht kwamen. Ik heb een heleboel van je geleerd en bewonder je wijsheid en je politieke blik die ervoor zorgt dat je onrecht vaak veel scherper ziet dan ik. Even bellen met jou bleek vaak een snelle oplossing voor proefschriftmisère. Daarbij hadden we vanaf dag één erg veel plezier. Een gedeelde liefde voor eten en zwemmen leidde tot veel goede uitjes (Het Dikkertje, Maarsseveense plassen, de Neder-Rijn in de regen). Ik hoop en denk dat we daar gewoon mee door gaan.

Dan zijn er ook nog andere vrienden en familieleden zonder wie de afgelopen jaren zo veel minder leuk waren geweest. Merel, ergens halverwege dit proefschrift veranderde de rol die we in elkaars leven spelen. Ik ben heel blij dat we belangrijk voor elkaar kunnen blijven. Dank voor alle steun en de vele heerlijke maaltijden die je de afgelopen jaren voor mij bereidde. Annemarije, we leerden elkaar net op tijd kennen om nog naast elkaar in de OBA stukken proefschrift te kunnen typen. Ik kijk enorm uit naar het proefschriftvrije vervolg van onze vriendschap. Sophie, dank voor alle gesprekken en alle gezelligheid sinds wij elkaar kennen. Ik ben heel blij met jou (en belde denk ik niet eerder zó veel met iemand). De Zeven, dat wij elkaar vijftien jaar geleden tegen zijn gekomen, beschouw ik als een enorm geluk. Dank voor alle lieve adviezen en alle grapjes. Mijn tante Emilia, heel veel dank voor je voortdurende interesse in wat ik doe. En ten slotte mijn moeder Lida. Steeds vaker bedenk ik hoe waardevol het is om op te groeien bij iemand die alle vertrouwen heeft in je kunnen en in je keuzes. Daar pluk ik nog iedere dag de vruchten van. Dankjewel.

