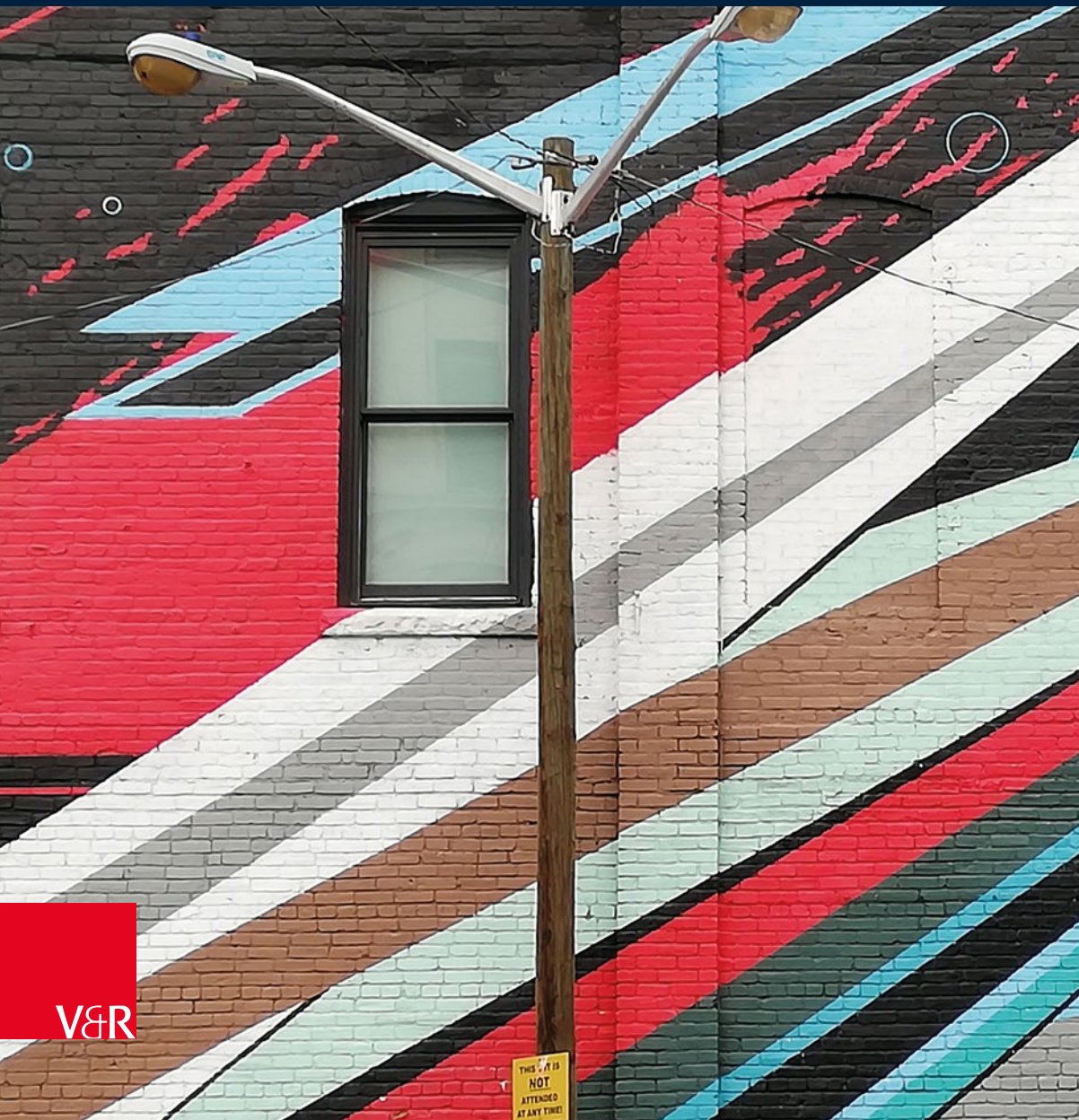
Trygve Wyller / Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati / Stefanie Knauss /
Hans-Günter Heimbrock / Hans-Joachim Sander / Carla Danani

Religion and Difference

Contested Contemporary Issues



V&R



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Trygve Wyller

Introduction: Framing Religion and Difference

Between Praxis, Populist Hijacking and Identitarian Politics

Starting from Praxis

In a highly profiled project directed toward irregular migrants in Northern Europe, the project leaders attend a weekly meeting. They are meeting to plan the details of the project event to occur later the same evening. This is a project where a Christian congregation is cooperating with a philanthropic organization of professional volunteers, lawyers, nurses, doctors, dentists, etc. Once a week these volunteers offer three hours of advice and care support for the irregular migrants living in that part of the country. The support project is located in the church building. The congregation is part of the project but does not run it: They support and co-act.

On this afternoon, the leading nurse says: "A few months ago the police went into a campsite run by a Christian organization, arresting the irregular migrants hiding there. This means that we have to increase the security of our project. This is the plan: You (pointing at two volunteers) go outside the church building to watch out for police cars. If you see them coming, you call my cell phone. Then I will call you (pointing again), who will open the two basement doors so that the irregulars can escape as quickly as possible. Because there are so many regular migrants living in this area there, the police will never notice the difference between the regulars and irregulars."

During this act of planned civil obedience, the minister of the congregation is standing quietly in the corner listening. He does not intervene, he does not protest, and he signals via body language that he is behind the plan.

The topic of this book is religion and difference. In such a context, the minister's behavior was symbolically strong: by condoning the act of civil disobedience, he signaled that his religion – his Christian faith – had given him the mandate to defend a plural society, in the sense that non-Christian migrants should be supported even beyond what is legal. The whole idea in this project, the cooperation between the congregation and the philanthropic organization, is that they share the fundamental idea: that people of color and of all religions and all ethnicities deserve to meet a nation and a church that accept them and care for them, regardless of their confession, faith, gender, and ethnicity. This specific project and minister represent one view on the relationship between religion and difference opposed to current trends in

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contemporary populism, especially what the American sociologist Rogers Brubaker calls "Christianism."[1]

Another Framing of Religion and Difference

Brubaker develops the concept "Christianism" to describe the tendency to use Christian religion as the core reason for populist identitarian politics. Christianists fight to keep the number of Muslims in their nation as low as possible. Christianists argue that Muslims represent an end to women and gay rights as well as similar liberal rights that are part of current European values. The articles in this book, however, point in another direction: religion (first and foremost here: the Christian religion) cannot use the Christian faith as a means of oppressing and avoiding non-Christians; nor can Christians oppress other Christians based on their sexual, gender, and ethnic differences.

In the age of increasing populist positions, Christianism is one of many different flavors of populism. We think there is a need to discuss, with a lower but serious voice, why and how religion also has a potentiality to argue for something else than the ideological support of its own position, i. e. identitarian politics. Yet the challenge is how to argue and reflect toward this more generous understanding of religion. We think that the main argument must start from "below," from how generous religion acts, how humanity and relations are practiced in everyday life, instead of employing the top-down model of how ideologies and functionalist pretentions of a specific religion look like. The cases and the approaches in the following articles address practices from many perspectives, but everyday experiences form the basic starting point for the discussion of religion and difference by the authors in this volume.

This volume was edited by the members of the editorial board of the Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht book series *Research in Contemporary Religion.* We hope that the series as well as this specific volume will contribute to international scholarship and reflection in field of contemporary religion. Religion today does not consist solely of scholarship; it is a contested and powerful part of public discussions and activities. (Christian) religion, of course, has always been part of a European public discussion, but today the issue of difference is part of significant tensions within that (Christian) religion itself. This is why we wanted to contribute to the heated topic of religion and difference by publishing the present edited volume. We aim at pursuing our own series policy, namely, to "promote research on religion from the perspective of phenomenological, empirical and cultural studies." The

1 Brubaker: 2017. Thanks go to my Norwegian colleague Cathrine Thorleifsson at the University of Oslo for informing me about this important reference.

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articles in this volume developed from these positions. We think such positions are needed if we are to discover and present a religion that opposes populist Christianism. Therefore, we first interpret practices, that is, activities where people, both consciously and unconsciously, strive to engage in religion as something generous and as something that promotes fairness and justice.

The above-mentioned opening case in this introduction symbolizes this intention. The minister who approved of civil disobedience in favor of the irregular migrants is communicating that there is a faith that does not always aim at identitarian politics, even when it is politically controversial. Most of the articles follow this line, even if the cases and arguments differ. We address challenges that are urgent in contemporary social and cultural practice, challenges that reveal where religious practices are being confronted with variations of identitarian politics. How can they respond and how can they find non-identitarian politics within religions themselves? Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (München) presents the contested issue of the *Haus der Religionen* in the Swiss city of Bern. Political authorities and civil society wanted to establish religious plurality in their city and constructed a building to house all of them. The equal space given to each religion, of course, caused many members to complain: they thought their own religion was unique. Pezzoli-Olgiati treats the question of whether this common space for all religions causes visitors to reflect: should religions respect, and not oppose, difference?

We chose in total six contested issues to discuss. We start with the just-mentioned *Haus der Religionen* in Bern. The second issue comes from Stefanie Knauss (Villanova), who researches the tense issue of LGBT identity and membership in the Catholic Church. This is a very different case than the one in Bern, but – parallel to Pezzoli-Olgiati – Knauss explores which reflections and traditions within the Catholic Church can theologically provide a space for gays.

The Bern case and the role of gays within the Catholic Church point to a more traditional kind of Christianism than the one addressed by Brubaker, who first of all analyzes the Christianism that claims Christian faith is the guarantee for liberal values like gay tolerance and free speech, etc. Accordingly, a high number of Muslims should not be included in Western society, since those are the people who oppress liberal rights. That position might be considered the most modern form of Christianism. The variation behind the conflicts in Bern and Rome is the older Christianism, which combines essentialism and conservative Bible interpretations to fight Islam. But there is another Christianism working parallel to the one conceptualized by Brubaker. Still, whether we view modern or traditional Christianism, what matters in this book is that the authors look for practices, experiences, and positions from inside (the Christian) religion which oppose and contest both old and new forms of Christianism.

Hans-Günter Heimbrock (Frankfurt) and Trygve Wyller (Oslo) present in their article two cases, one from the migration-influenced island of Lamp-

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edusa and one from language courses for young refugees in Germany. The authors argue that experiencing the participation in a shared creation leads to a position that contests illiberal Christianism. When people share creation, religion must defend difference, since difference is less fundamental than the shared creation.

Practice as Praxis

The populist interpretation of religion as something necessary to avoid all kinds of unwanted ideologies belongs to a functionalist interpretation of religion. One major contribution here stems from Emile Durkheim[2] (1857–1917). Durkheim was not a populist, though modern populists do use the Durkheimian argument: religion (and they mean primarily a general and unspecified idea of Christianity) provides the guarantee for the continued presence of "our" (either secular – Brubaker – or conservative – many cases in this book) way of Western democracies, framed by values of Christian origin.

Drawing on this functionalist understanding of religion thus serves to establish an idea of a religious tradition as something homogeneous and coherent, and to underline the difference and boundaries that separate "our" tradition and "their" tradition. It is this form of religion and Christianity that is disputed and contested in this volume. Carla Danani (Macerata) contributes to this discussion from a more philosophical position. She introduces the reader to the decisive philosophical discourse on how religion can be accepted as a legitimate partner in public reason. From one perspective, one can interpret religion as a particular position compared with the universality of public reason. In such a context, Danani argues that public reason cannot be dominated only by the question of what is legitimate and what is not legitimate in the public debate. Rather, religion introduces an aspect of otherness, and that aspect of otherness in turn adds decisive perspectives to the quality of the public debate.

Thus, the theoretical approaches in this volume differ considerably from article to article. Nevertheless, we share some basic preconceptions: non-Christianist religion cannot be studied primarily because of its functionalist aspect. Non-Christianism is a practice that in itself is valuable.

When in this volume Hans-Joachim Sander (Salzburg) analyzes the caricature with the phrase "Tout est pardonné" on the front page of *Charles Hebdo* in the first issue after the terror attack, he addresses religion as practice. According to Sander, one would not have expected that the secularist magazine would ever positively address core religious issues. However, when *Charlie Hebdo* did so, the message and the outcome were surprising and challenging. For this reason, this book tries to elaborate on what the

2 Durkheim: 1995.

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relationship between religion and difference means when religion is understood as practices that perform difference and have their deeper meaning just in such kind of practice.

This means that we approach religion in the tradition Aristotle called *praxis*.[3] *Praxis* with an "x" indicates that something has a value in itself and not only through what is achieved, but by what participants acknowledge as meaningful in itself. In our view, too many contemporary discussions on religion and difference contribute to the opposite thrust of the Aristotelian tradition by relating to religious practice as *poiesis*, that is, by looking first at the impact and not giving priority to inherent values. One very common, and politically correct, way of interpreting religion from the position of *poiesis* is to claim that the significance of the Christian religion is enabling liberal society. Religion then is defined by its *function*, which eventually leads to interpreting the significance of Christianity as a contribution to a specific identity.

Our argument is that, when one studies religion as *praxis*, one necessarily views the religion/difference relationship from another perspective than when religion is studied as *poiesis*. In Aristotle's thinking, a poetic action serves as an external effect on its own performance; it is the instrumentality of practice. One acts in order to achieve something. Many scholars have contributed to the *poiesis* aspect of religion, difference, and practice. We think the time is ripe to involve the *praxis* part of religious practices.

Lived Religions of Difference

Praxis is the opposite of *poiesis:* it refers to practices that are their own ends. One does not "do" religion in order to achieve something. However, this again leads to a surprise, as the the religious educator Günter Heimbrock shows in his article about the confessional aspect of religious education. The common opinion, among scholars as well as among the public, is that teachers should hide their own confession when teaching students religion.

Heimbrock's research comes to the opposite conclusion: confessions do not necessarily mean to instrumentalize goals. Confession also means connecting in such a way that it enables trust between students and teachers. Therefore, when this book turns to the *praxis* element of religion and away from the instrumental, cognitive element, unexpected results emerge. The practices may be ends in themselves and have religious significance even if some of them are not considered to be "religion" by any of the participants. This is also the case in Sander's discussion of the *Charlie Hebdo* case and in Heimbrock and Wyller's report on the migration island of Lampedusa. Religion seems to be happening even when the context is rather "secular." One more surprise!

3 Knight: 2007.

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This focus on *praxis* as the unexpected part of the contribution of the humanities to the normative has been part of academic discussion for many decades now. The Irish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most important contributors. His core argument in *After Virtue*[4] is that ethics and virtues develop within social *praxis*. Virtues are not rules that we learn and then apply, but rather are trained and shaped within social *praxis*. By living in such *praxis*-oriented communities, people develop the attitudes and habits decidedly needed when facing challenging situations and choices.

We think this position is a fruitful approach to the discussion of religion and difference. MacIntyre's interpretation of Aristotle teaches us that we can learn from social *praxis* – a position opposite to the Christianist and similar populist positions, which tend to start from ideology (top down), and claim, for example, that the ideas behind a Christian framing of society are democratic and aim at equality, whereas Muslim ideas are not. The paradox is that this ideological position in itself is not the problem. The problem is that the Christianist approach starts from the top and does not care for the surprises emerging from *praxis*. That is why we criticize the Christianist position, both from theological and from religious vantage points.

Difference as Inherent to Religion

If one combines MacIntyre's basis in *praxis* and the surprise aspect of religion with the phenomenological approach (found, among others, in Sara Ahmed's writings[5]), then there are some important elements to build the critical spaces of religion and difference. Ahmed, together with the phenomenological mainstream, claims that encountering people relieves them of being aliens. Encountering means developing a sensory awareness of what is already connected. People can of course be strangers, but they cannot be aliens; strangers are embodied people whom we sense and from whom we cannot escape. To learn from all these innumerous *praxis* encounters makes for a good start for a less hostile and more generous relationship between religion and difference.

This also rejuvenates the concept of lived religion developing in the same direction. Lived religion covers a lot more than institutionalized religion. Lived religion is alive because difference is organic and already a basic element of lived religion. One recent contribution that aims at responding to similar issues as found in the articles of the present book is *Lived Religion and the Politics of (In)Tolerance*. Building on three decades of research in the field of lived religion, Ganzevoort and Sremac think that "over the last decades the

4 MacIntyre: 1981.
5 Ahmed: 2000 and 2012.

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perspective of lived religion has emerged to remedy the shortcomings of earlier perspectives that approach religion as stable systems and that focus more on the official positions, traditions, creeds, and hierarchal structures."[6]

We share this position. Our approach to the field of lived religion, however, adds a new aspect to the discussion: When religion is no longer a "stable system," then difference organically belongs to all those areas where religion is lived. Pursuing religion first as *praxis* requires paying attention to difference as inherent in religion, or more specifically: inherent in the Christian religion. One should pay considerably more attention to *praxis* when different cultural, social, and ethnic participants share the same space or act in the same ritual. On such occasions, an inherent, and not instrumental, tendency is going on, and this inherent tendency is something that does not end in identitarian politics.[7]

This gives a fruitful interpretive perspective on the difference between populism and identitarian politics, on the one hand, and a more generous relationship between religion and difference on the other hand. When the point of departure is lived religion, as in the opening case of this introduction, people are already connected and involved. The minister who supports the plan for civil disobedience protecting irregular migrants from being arrested in the church is already connected to most of the people in that space. For him these are decisive and normative connections, and he is committed to them even if the established religion with which he is affiliated is not. Yet it is his lived religion in that space that most deeply motivates his commitments. This is a relationship between religion and difference that opposes the Christianist trajectory presented above and most of the other ways religion today is used to support and preserve populist and fundamentalist positions. It is our hope that the contributions in this volume serve to expand and deepen such perspectives.

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6 Ganzevoort/Sremac: 2017, 4.

7 Machado/Turner/Wyller: 2018.

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Difference and Contested Public Places

Spatial Representations of Religion in Contemporary Society

Who is permitted to express religious belonging in public space? Whose symbols are deemed worthy of display so that they find a broad audience? Which religious practices should be made visible, and which should be confined to the intimacy of the private sphere? The presence and visibility of religious identities in public places is a highly contested issue in contemporary Europe.[1]

I introduce this chapter with the instructive – and symptomatic – case of Christian Meier and an artistic performance that was much discussed in Swiss media in autumn 2016. In early September that year, the artist, who lives mainly in Shanghai, installed a 3-meter tall crescent made of acrylic glass on a mountain summit in the idyllic Alpine landscape of the canton of Appenzell. Connected to photovoltaic cells, the crescent glowed at night. To emphasize the symbolic significance of this spatial, material statement within the on-going debate about the visibility of religious symbols in public space, the work of art was placed on a mountain peak called "Freedom" (fig. 1). The artist had not received permission to display his artwork at that location, and he therefore agreed to remove the crescent within a week.

In the many interviews that followed this contested performance (objects cannot be put on display in the mountains without permission from the relevant authorities and the owner of the land), the artist highlighted the provocative character of his artwork. His aim was to promote a debate about what he saw as the absurdity of installing crosses on mountain tops. As an atheist, Meier considers religion a private affair, and he therefore contends that neither Christian nor any other religious symbols should be erected on mountain summits. For Meier, nature is disfigured by symbols of the irrational way of thinking that is religion. By choosing an Islamic symbol, he aimed to encourage the local population to think critically about the alleged normality of displaying "religion" in the beauty of the Alpine landscape. According to the artist, the crescent was selected because of its highly provocative potential within contemporary political debates, but not as a direct reference to

1 Many thanks to David Leutwyler, the director of the *Haus der Religionen*, and to Brigitta Rotach, responsible for its cultural programme, for their generous support. My thanks also to Stefan Maurer for his kind permission to use his photographs and to Rona Johnston for her great help in proofreading the text.

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Fig. 1. Installation by Christian Meier on a peak called "Freedom" (2140 m) in the Canton of Appenzell, Switzerland, 08. 09. 2016.

Muslims living in Switzerland. In addition, he was fascinated by the aesthetic power of this form: displayed in oversize in such a wonderful location, it would look spectacular, day and night.[2]

This artistic initiative by an individual has been politicized by wider debates in Switzerland and other European countries. The ban on building minarets in Switzerland, introduced into the federal constitution after a national referendum held in November 2009,[3] and the interdiction on wearing certain types of clothing that cover the face or the body[4] correlate chronologically – and, I suggest, in substance – with the controversy about crosses in public buildings such as schools and in public spaces such as mountain tops.

The positions adopted in public and political debates cover a broad span. Some contributors consider the presence of any religious symbol in public space an unacceptable highlighting of a phenomenon that in a secular society belongs in the private sphere. Others argue against religious symbols in the name of religious freedom or out of respect for people who have no relationship with religious communities and/or traditions. Yet others main-

2 For a selection of the interviews with Christian Meier that appeared in newspapers in the German-speaking area: Hehli: 2016; Knopf: 2016; Ritter: 2016; Naef: 2016.

3 Mayer: 2011.

4 See e. g. Legge sull'ordine pubblico (LOrP), Art. 2,l. (http://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DI/Documentazione/RLorp/Legge_sulla_dissimulazione_del_volto_negli_spazi_pubblici.pdf [accessed 25. 03. 2017]) of the Canton of Ticino: this law prohibits covering one's face in a public place. While the law does not specifically address religious clothing, the campaign that promoted the initiative and the application of the law once it had passed both made specific reference to Muslim women wearing a burka or niqab.

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tain that the allegedly increasing Islamization of Europe can only be stopped by a self-confident "local" religion, that is, by Christianity, and by the promotion of vaguely defined "Christian values." Christian symbols such as crosses then join the impressive architectural heritage of various Christian denominations to become synecdoches for "European" or "Swiss" culture in general. Others are comfortable with the presence of religious symbols of Christianity and/or other religious traditions and communities in public spaces: they argue on behalf of their own religion and its historical and social significance or in favor of a legitimate expression of religious belief in a pluralist society.

Many of the opinions found within contemporary political and media debates can be understood as attempts to construct identities by creating a radical distinction between "us" and the "other."[5] The process of othering is variously articulated: in the case of Meier and his illuminated crescent, a secular, rationalistic artist contested the visibility of Christianity on mountain summits, presenting himself as an atheist, placing himself in opposition to Christianity and religion, and claiming a "symbol-free" Alpine landscape.

From the perspective of the study of religion, the arguments staged and points of view articulated are noteworthy, but so too are aspects left unmentioned. Crosses displayed in the Alps have complex religious significance in a history that encompasses a typology of crosses as well as other material issues that are not just denominationally determined. Such issues are related to the different functions of the Alpine zone that in the modern era and up until today has been profoundly transformed, from the subsistence farming of rural societies to the Romantic discovery of the mountains, from the conquest of a hostile nature to contemporary leisure pursuits, sport, and tourism.[6] Furthermore the crosses are not alone, for Tibetan flags are also widespread as references to religion in the mountains. Those flags do not correspond at all with the distribution of religious affiliation within the Swiss population,[7] but instead show connections between forms of mountaineering tourism in the global era (fig. 2).

Such controversy provides evidence of the significance of public space not only as a political or scholarly category but also as a lived experience, as a locus of social life. Both premise and product of social life, space interacts with individual biographies, shared cultures, and national identities. Religion is one of many factors that influence the production and reception of space. This chapter will discuss methodological strategies for approaching space as a

5 On stereotypes about others in Switzerland cf. Engler: 2012. On the concept of othering in relation to religious identity cf. Mecheril/Thomas-Olalde: 2011; Sökefeld: 2011; Dahinden/Moret/Duemmler: 2011.

6 Cf. Nicolson: 1997; Egli/Tomkowiak: 2011; Mathieu: 2015.

7 Cf. the overview of the distribution of denominations and religions within the population in Switzerland in 2017 in https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/it/home/statistiche/popolazione/lingue-religioni/religioni.assetdetail.1901537.html [accessed 25.03.2017].

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