

»Researching Muslim Worlds: regions and disciplines« by Ulrike Freitag, Programmatic Text No 6, 2013

Birgit Meyer, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University and visiting professor ZMO, b.meyer@uu.nl

This is a programmatic text, based on a thorough reflection of a long-term experience with doing and facilitating research on Muslim cultures and societies at ZMO. Even though so far I have not been working in this particular field, I find the text very instructive and stimulating. It does not only offer a subtle analysis of the complex transformation of this particular field, showing how the object of study is entangled with changing geopolitical world orders and networks of knowledge production. The issues addressed by Ulrike Freitag are highly relevant to a broader discussion about the production of knowledge in the light of an increasing awareness of global entanglements in Western academia, calling for new, transregional and transdisciplinary approaches and attitudes to what was traditionally framed as the non-Western world (now often referred to as Global South). Future possibilities for the production of knowledge that transcends downtrodden us-them distinctions and Orientalist representations need to be discerned in the light of a critical exploration of past modes of generating knowledge about non-Western Others in particular colonial and postcolonial power structures. Ulrike Freitag's multi-layered approach is exemplary for the critical analysis that is needed in order to move beyond a superficial surfing along with fashionable calls for Internationalization and the like. Indeed, a serious attempt to move into that direction means more than endorsing the adoption of English as a language for communication and the spread of the Western model of academia. What is needed is a clear awareness, as expressed by her text, of actual historically constituted, divergent *practices of producing, sharing and using knowledge* with their specific dynamics of in- and exclusion. This involves a complex configuration of geographical

areas, scholars (from various disciplines and with different fields of area expertise) and their interlocutors, definitions of the objects and objectives of research, authorized epistemes, research agendas and themes, modes of writing and representation. Importantly, Ulrike Freitag does not only indicate pitfalls and difficulties, but offers practical ideas for mitigating them. And as I could note during my stay at the ZMO over the past six months (see below), her ideas do indeed appear to materialize in – and are fed by – an engaging academic collaboration among a geographically and disciplinary highly diverse group of researchers, for whom a constant reflection about the nexus of knowledge and the infrastructures for knowledge production is an integral part of informal conversations and formal seminars.

Trained as a cultural anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam, over the past twenty years I conducted research on Christianity (involving the presence of nineteenth-century mission societies as well as the current popularity of Pentecostalism) and indigenous religious traditions in Ghana. Since 2011 I have been a professor of religious studies at Utrecht University. Drawn into quite fundamental debates about how to reconfigure the object and objectives of the discipline, this new position prompted me to reflect more explicitly on the genealogy and legacy of the understandings and approaches of religion from different disciplinary angles, such as biblical studies, history, religious studies, anthropology and Islamic studies (which are all present in our department). I am pleading for a postcolonial approach in the study of religion that de-centers and de-Westernizes the study of religion by drawing attention to frontier zones of Western outreach and the ensuing transregional links. Obviously, Ulrike Freitag's multi-

faceted statement is extremely helpful in this endeavour, especially since my own expertise relates thematically mainly to Christianity and regionally to Africa.

My current involvement with the ZMO takes place via my research project *Habitats and Habitus. Politics and Aesthetics of Religious World-Making*. Generously funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and hosted by the ZMO in the framework of the Anneliese-Maier-Research-Award scheme, it is one of the central concerns of this project to investigate similarities, differences, overlaps and tensions between Muslim and Christian actors and organizations in urban Africa. The overall aim of the project is to transcend the rather problematic divide between scholars with expertise about either Islam or Christianity in the study of religion in Africa (and beyond). The separation of fields of scholarly inquiry around one or the other religious tradition, which is further enhanced by the rise of specific anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, is problematic. It tends to make scholars neglect the dynamics of plural religious arenas in which actors with different religious backgrounds coexist, albeit under specific historical and political conditions and often in tension with each other. The point here is to develop a conceptual framework to study the genesis and power structures of such plural fields, as well as the ways in which different players rub against, align with, and copy from each other. While I am interested in some kind of comparison, it would of course be mistaken to presume an equivalence of Christianity and Islam as world religions. Such a view would resuscitate a problematic 19th-century legacy that understands world religions as more or less separate, essentialized entities, and hence as abstracted from their specific historical contexts and de-politicized. The notion of world religion, as many critics have noted, suggests a false similarity.

As suggested by Freitag, it is certainly »interesting to compare and contrast the »Islamic World System« to the ways in which Catholicism was constructed during the European Middle Ages«. Interesting in this comparison is the fact that medieval Catholicism could not yet be reduced to »religion« (as understood in the modern era), but involved a larger, political, social, economic and cultural realm – indeed a »world«. However, comparison on the level of such religious »worlds« has its limits. In the aftermath of the Reformation and the Enlightenment the political role of Christianity was re-framed; in what Charles Taylor called the »secular age« religion ultimately became a matter of personal choice. While the actual role of Christianity in various European settings (with the USA forming yet another distinct case) has been more complex than the idea of secularization as an intrinsic and distinctive feature of modernity suggests, it is still the case that modern religion was reconfi-

gured as part of a »secular formation« (Asad). In modern Western societies the relation between private and public religion, and the boundary between secular and religious, have been subject to constant negotiations. These negotiations were enhanced with the increasing presence and manifestations of adherents of different faiths, especially Muslims, in Western societies, yielding hot debates about (and a lot of academic research on) religious freedom and the public expression of Islam, and the presumed »return« of religion and the rise of post-secular society. With enhanced streams of transnational migration and communication, our globalized world is characterized by the rise of plural urban settings in which multiple faiths and secular positions co-exist, albeit under conditions of inequality.

The defining characteristic of religious studies as a discipline is comparison. How to do comparative religion in our time? What is the *tertium quid* that allows for identifying analogies and differences between historically and culturally specific phenomena in a globalized world in which these phenomena intersect? A case in point is that in Western societies religion is necessarily framed in relation to the secular, while this may not be the case in a great deal of the Muslim worlds referred to by Freitag where religion is not understood as narrowly and is placed in a different political configuration. Significantly different understandings of religion ensue. As argued convincingly by Asad and others, the universal definition of religion that governed a great deal of research in the study of religion (and underpins debates about religion in modern societies) needs to be deconstructed by unmasking its a post-Enlightenment Protestant provenance. Still, once such a definition is rejected, the question is on what grounds a productive comparison of religious traditions could rest. I do not think that it makes sense to get rid of the concept of religion per se; the point rather is to use it reflexively as a historically situated concept that makes comparison possible, and exactly for that reason should not be employed in an essentializing manner, as congruous with the phenomena to which it refers. Conceptualizing religion in this sense means engaging in a discourse that seeks to mediate across distinctions while at the same time critically reflecting the epistemes that underpin this discourse. Obviously, this issue is currently under heavy discussion in the study of religion. For the purpose of my current project, my concern is not a comparison of Islam and Christianity in Africa per se. I am interested in comparing different modalities of structuring the plural arenas in which Muslims, Christians and adherents of other religions as well as non-religions intersect. How to capture the actual historical or contemporary encounters between adherents of different religions in a particular plural field?

Here Freitag's broad, historically grounded understanding of the notion of »Muslim Worlds« offers intriguing opportunities for debate and collaboration. Rejecting a homogenized view of Muslim societies and their reduction to Islam, she explains that »Muslim worlds« refer both to Muslim *majority* societies in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, and to *minority* Muslim diasporas elsewhere, for instance in the West. While the former are usually characterized by internal diversity (possibly including the presence of, a.o. Christians), the latter are embedded in plural settings that are often shaped (at least in Western societies) by a (post-)Christian culture under the aegis of secularity (and secularist world views). In both cases, the positions of Muslims – and, by implication, their involvement with non-Muslim secular or religious Others – in more or less diverse settings are a central issue. Freitag opens the door for the study of such plural arenas in different regions in past and present. Many important conceptual and methodological questions and issues arise. What are the shifting cultural, social, political and legal implications of the notions of majority and minority? How did recent global debates about human rights and freedom of religion transform the meaning and implications of these notions and their politics of use? How did the rise of secularity, as bound to modernity, impact on the management of religious diversity? Which other, locally grounded notions are mobilized in state-condoned politics

of religious and cultural difference? What are the »worlds« that arise in these settings, and in how far do they overlap or collide with more or less long-standing »Muslim worlds«? How could the notion of »world,« which so far remains somewhat blank, be further developed and »operationalized«? What is the methodological and conceptual value of paying attention to »world-making« – understood in the sense of actual practices in relation to material and visual culture, architecture and the body?

Obviously, focusing on what I call politics and aesthetics of world-making in plural settings with Christian and Muslim actors and movements, my current research project is about these issues. Initially I thought that it might be somewhat marginal to core ZMO research concerns. But engaging with Ulrike Freitag's text, and partaking in discussions at ZMO, I have begun to realize that this is not so. Or perhaps better, as anthropologists know so well, what appears marginal (my expertise regarding Christianity in Africa) may be central in other respects (the issue of »majorities« and »minorities« in religious »worlds«). I sense that for the coming years, the current ZMO research program will offer ample incentives for further discussion and engagement that will no doubt be extremely beneficial for my own research, as well as for my broader attempt to develop new foci and approaches in the study of religion.