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### Afterword

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# Afterword

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## An Afterword

This volume has examined the complexity of interreligious encounters by means of a variety of empirical case studies in Europe. By proposing a three-fold conceptual lens and providing both rich empirical descriptions and thorough analytical reflections, the book has shed light on the various accounts in which the interreligious takes place and shapes social encounters, whether as an intentional aim or as a by-product of other governance strategies.

In our introduction, we identified three analytical lenses that enable systematic examination of interreligious encounters: those of *materialities*, *spatialities* and *practices*. While not all the contributions in this book explicitly draw on the theories presented in the introduction, and while the authors each use the proposed analytical categories in a unique and flexible way, taken together the contributions illustrate the fruitfulness and productivity of the analytical categories of spatialities, materialities and practices with regard to the analysis of empirical data. The contributions illustrate the potential for a stronger integration of practice-theoretical accounts and theories of materiality (theoretical perspectives that both lead to new considerations of space as well) into the studies of interreligious dialogues and encounters. From our perspective, this novel integration should continue to be advanced in the future. We often found all three dimensions being simultaneously represented in the contributions to the volume, which indicates the multi-dimensionality of the cases studied in each of the chapters, as well as some of the limitations of analytical categories. We kept the structure nevertheless, since our focusing on these three dimensions—space, materiality and practice—made visible how new forms of the social emerge from interreligious initiatives, even under unjust and unbalanced power relations (or maybe exactly because of them). As an Afterword to this volume, we will point out our two main findings in this collection, which are reflected, explicitly or implicitly, in most of the contributions: the productivity of interreligious encounters, and the effectiveness of the power inequalities that linger on in interreligious encounters. We will close by outlining some new questions that the work of this volume opens out for future inquiry.

## The Productivity of Interreligious Encounters

Interreligious encounters are not just a product of social interactions: they are themselves socially productive. They generate new realities, subjectivities, spaces, materialities and practices, as well as reproduce existing ones. In general, these types of encounters create new social realities that may contribute to the goals set out intentionally for those encounters, such as enhancing conviviality and social cohesion. However, they can also generate contradictory realities, such as reinforcing inequalities and reifying religious differences. Several chapters in the book have pointed out the unintended consequences of both planned and unplanned encounters. The unexpectedness of this is what makes such encounters interesting study objects with rich analytical potential. Their analysis highlights the fact that although encounters may produce the intended outcomes, they may also generate unintended outcomes or no concrete outcome at all.

The chapters in this volume display the productivity of interreligious encounters. In other words, they demonstrate that these interactions do not simply bring together people from different religious backgrounds to discuss their faiths. Rather, interreligious encounters generate new realities, projects, networks, identities, etc. As the study by Prideaux and Mortimer shows, new connections between religious actors may result from policies to fund the social action of a variety of religious groups. Interestingly, then, interreligious encounters may be the non-intentional outcome of specific policies that are not intended to generate interreligious encounters specifically. These new connections may generate new forms of interaction, or they may fade away as the funding schemes that facilitated them disappear. It is important to not romanticize these encounters because they may well just be a temporary outcome of a funding scheme without any further consequence in terms of furthering coexistence between people of different faiths.

As Nagel shows in this volume, interreligious art produces not only new aesthetics in the religious field, it also inscribes itself into the urban fabric, thereby transforming the public space beyond the framing of interreligious encounters. Similarly, Otterbeck's contribution provides an understanding of how the art of a distinguished and popular photographer produces what Otterbeck calls 'dialogic art'. This art communicates a specific Muslim aesthetic to the wider multireligious public, thereby creating new images of Muslims and their faith(s) all over the world. In a very different account, in her chapter Djolai introduces us to societal negotiations that have been coined by a new order in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. She shows how the (inter)religious dimension is related to and mutually shapes the conception and realization of town planning, especially in a multi-religious context like Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The case studies in this book illustrate the great variety of social productivity generated by interreligious encounters, as well as emphasize the

unexpectedness of such encounters. Whether interreligious encounters are planned or not, and whether they take the shape of an architectural project, a collective meditation, an artistic installation or a local partnership, they all generate effects that were not envisaged from the outset. Therefore, the study of the interreligious should be opened to capturing not only the effects outlined in the plans for such interreligious encounters and dialogues, but also to the myriad and sometimes unimaginable consequences they may have.

### **Power and Inequalities in Interreligious Encounters**

In contrast to other publications on the topic that interpret interreligious dialogues primarily as a social phenomenon and as a way to overcome differences and to generate mutual understanding, we illuminate the different dimensions of power, inclusion and exclusion, as well as societal participation, that are realized or manifested through interreligious encounters. In this regard, we followed the approach of Marianne Moyaert, who takes into account an intersectional perspective in her volume on *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries*. While her edited volume does not elaborate further on the dynamics of power, we did find this motive to be crucial to several of our contributions.

Through the analyses in the chapters of this book, we observe how the power dynamics between different actors are played out in interreligious encounters and in their effects. The example discussed by Burchard and Haening shows that the social position of different religious groups within local religious and urban hierarchies affects their engagement with interreligious encounters and projects, as well as their assessment of the potential of those projects to transform social reality. In this sense, interreligious encounters may reproduce existing hierarchies in the project or encounter itself, as well as more broadly in society, rather than generating more equal realities.

Similarly, Emmerich's chapter shows how partnerships between religious and non-religious actors may produce certain alliances which can lead to positive outcomes, such as the protective function that an interreligious network can have for a mosque community, which is more frequently under the spotlight. At the same time, however, this reinforces the inequalities of power between religious and social groups and goes hand in hand with patronage relations. Moreover, his work also shows how what Emmerich calls postsecular governance networks may also create the figure of the 'professional (inter-)religious representative', which creates a sort of para-governance that is not submitted to democratic scrutiny and which also erases the internal diversities of religious groups. All these processes, then, have an impact on the distribution of power, sometimes balancing it out, sometimes making it even more unequal.

Interestingly, these inequalities not only take shape in interpersonal encounters. In their study of the materiality of the production and

circulation of a digital poster/image for the celebration of the Day of Islam in the Catholic Church of Poland, Motak and Krotofil show how the poster represents inequalities in and through its visuality. The way the poster represents Islam and Catholicism was contested because for some it reverted the balance of power between these two groups. Shifting power relations are also at work in the representations of Muslims in the exhibition analysed by Winkler, which was contested by some Muslim representatives because it attributed more power to certain conceptions of Islam that they conceived as not sufficiently religiously normative. In other words, images and material objects may contribute to depicting and reproducing certain social and religious hierarchies through their representation of interreligious dialogue and encounter. At the same time, however, such encounters and projects may open up spaces for the contestation and negotiation of such hierarchies.

This point is also reflected in those chapters that analyse the *simultaneity* of inclusion and exclusion, and the strengthening and the dissolving of differences, within the practices of interreligious encounters and dialogues. The chapter by Galal and Hvenegård-Lassen, for example, shows how specific modes of behaviour and self-relationship are constantly produced and transformed within the atmospheric and bodily practices of interreligious encounters. These modes of behaviour and self-relationship can generate sociality, but they also go along with the establishment of certain normative ways of 'doing dialogue' and of being dialogical while potentially excluding other modalities. The contribution by Jan Winkler illustrates how both differentiating power technologies that materialize difference and binding technologies that aim at producing desired subjectivities and impulses for a cross-differential 'coming together' are *dispersed* within the materiality of local interreligious practices.

## Looking Ahead

As we indicated in the introduction, this book contributes to the further theoretical and conceptual elaboration of interreligious dialogue and encounters. Our approach differs slightly from those which try to reduce interreligious dialogue to a single analytical category (a social movement, a policy paradigm, etc.). Instead, in using our three-fold approach based on the concepts of space, materiality and practice, we have offered a different lens through which to study these three dimensions, which are involved in the dynamics of such encounters.

For future research, and particularly in connection with the conceptual perspectives proposed in this book, a whole series of questions arise that need to be addressed. On the one hand, reference should be made to the argument of the Introduction: against the background of a distinctive diversification of interreligious relations, encounters and dialogues, flexible categories have to be developed in order to do justice to this 'diversity of dialogues'. However, beyond this, further specific questions arise.

Frequently, encounters are celebrated in academic as well as in social and political debates as emancipatory events that will strengthen the community and overcome differences. At the same time, dialogue is cultivated and imagined as a power-free and symmetrical form of communication that will primarily reduce conflict and promote social cohesion. Without negating these real and important potentials of encounters and dialogues, we would like to problematize these perspectives. Encounters can generate hopeful new perspectives and cross-differential bonds, but they can also create conflicts and reproduce or even reinforce sedimented relations of difference and identity. Encounters reflect an interplay of tendencies to come together and tendencies to draw boundaries. An analytical focus on the concrete spaces, materialities and practices in and through which encounters are mediated can and should make this interplay visible in the context of future research.

Similar reflections are also relevant with regard to the format or rationality of dialogue. Dialogue connotes an absence of power and appears primarily as a path towards mutual understanding. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that any practices and politics of dialogue take place within social power relations and, moreover, can themselves operate as interventions or as normative technologies of power. Precisely because these dimensions of dialogue are often barely represented at the programmatic level, the power effects of dialogue-related practices and politics can easily be obscured. Consequently, the power effects, as well as the often intertwined processes of inclusion and exclusion within dialogue-related practices and politics, often unfold in rather implicit and subtle ways. The focus on the sites, materialities and practices of interreligious dialogues and encounters proposed in this book thus offers future research perspectives for elaborating precisely on these subtle relations of power.

Moreover, hegemonic notions of dialogue and mutual understanding through dialogue tend to reproduce the idea that understanding is primarily an effect of intellectual processes and a language-mediated exchange of opinions and views. This is undeniable, but we would like to point out that mutual understanding is always also mediated by practices, embodied experiences, emotions and feelings. The extent to which mutual understanding is or is not achieved, and what forms of understanding may be thinkable and may be made manifest at all, all depend on the concrete, situated and corporeal practices of interreligious dialogues and encounters, as well as on the spatial and material configurations of dialogue. Further research will need to take more account of this more-than-representational dimension of the practices and politics of interreligious encounters and dialogues in order to understand the complex and conflictual dynamics of interreligious dialogues.

Finally, it should be noted that, in the context of processes of societal pluralization and diversification (like the effects of globalization, global migration, new forms of communication and various cultural transformations), many established identity patterns are being challenged. Future practices

and politics of interreligious dialogues need to recognize the existence of complex, hybrid and multi-layered identities as well as develop intersectional sensibilities. The grounding of dialogues in fixed identity categories as the basis for a communicative reaching out towards the 'other' needs to be continuously reflected on and questioned. The contributions in this book and the conceptual perspectives the book offers encourage future research not to adopt the identity-political presuppositions and sedimentations of interreligious dialogues, but to engage in an ongoing exploration of new perspectives and concepts enabling us to understand the complex negotiations involved over issues of identity and belonging. The aim is to make visible the fault lines, transformations and contradictions of interreligious dialogues and encounters and to analyse them with regard to their effects in local contexts. In sum, this book has opened up perspectives on the situated practice of interreligious encounters that go beyond the programmatic level, whereby a deeper understanding of this practice is necessary to be able to develop hopeful visions for the dialogue-oriented politics of the future.