Cristiana Facchini, Cornelia Haas, Vera Höke, Katharina Mersch,
Britta Müller-Schauenburg

Afterword: walking the edges

Our section looks at different religious constellations in a variety of historical and cultural contexts and the way in which individual actors within them seek their path to the Divine, God, or Wisdom (Facchini, Mersch, Haas, Höke), or seek to restore religious legality to their marginalised position as a deposed pope and justification of remaining in the office in terms of religious law (Mueller-Schauenburg). Contributions in this section embrace different historical periods and contexts, including the Latin Christian Middle Ages, Christians and Jews of the early modern period from Northern Europe to the Ottoman Empire, and the modern period that connects continental Europe, Great Britain, India and the United States. This selection implies that we are dealing with very different notions of “religion” and equally different concepts of the individual self or non-individual self.

Despite the huge differences in historical and cultural contexts, our chapters share common features: they all deal with case studies that move on the sideways of the mainstream. They deal with religious minorities, excluded or expelled people, but also with exceptional cases and splinter groups. In different ways all of these walk the edges, either of one or between several religions, cultures or geographical regions.

Two chapters address medieval Latin Christianity. Katharina Mersch deals with two different forms of exclusion: one leading the Christian soul away from society and God (excommunicates), and one from society towards God (monks, nuns and others). This process pushes individuals or groups to the edges of Christian society. This also holds true for Britta Müller-Schauenburg’s case study, which deals with Benedict XIII, an antipope during the Western schism (1378–1417). While sticking to the authority of his office, he was abandoned by the main body of the church.

Cristiana Facchini analyses religious enthusiasm in the seventeenth century, a phenomenon that affected Protestant, Catholic and Jew alike. If Jews were on the edge of both Christian and Muslims societies, their diaspora interacted with a common tradition of sacred texts that supported the idea of prophetism or pneumatic experiences. In the case of Christian groups, pneumatic experiences were always deemed dangerous, as they were often performed by people who would be persecuted or marginalised, as in the case of Quakers and ‘revulsionnaires’. Prophetism, and therefore ‘spirit possession’ had always been conceived as a challenge to established religious communities and norms.

The chapters by Cornelia Haas and Vera Höke address cases in which historical actors walked on the edges between several religions, aiming for a harmonious whole based on an eclectic synthesis of their parts. Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884), a leader of the Bengali religious movement called Brahmo Samaj, aimed for an eclectic universal religion. His approach was not only informed by Western Unitarianism and Transcendentalism but also by Indian philosophical and religious sources. The Theosophical Movement, founded in 1875 in New York, represents in itself a cosmopolitan fringe-phenomenon, based mainly on literature, avant garde spirituality and spiritualism.

Furthermore, all religious groups described here – laity, clerical, and religious minorities – developed a dialectal relationship between the search for a special (and individualised) contact with the Divine and the interaction with the social realm. Secondly, strong tendencies to question a given authority are evident. The value of tradition is a common topic of discussion, often via – or resulting in – restorative ideas. Tradition is necessarily taken up in a selective way and always remains ambivalent. Thirdly, the phenomena observed can be described by a threefold terminology of a) exclusion, b) inclusion, and c) seclusion (solitude).

- a) By *exclusion* we mean, on the one hand, all those practices that aim to ban ‘deviant’ individuals from the “true” community of believers, the “body of Christ”, and the collective memory (Mersch, Müller-Schauenburg). On the other hand, social exclusion enhanced many forms of religious individualisation that might eventually support the rise of new religious communities (Facchini). In the case study of the Theosophical Movement, exclusion might be supportive of the endorsement of a new authoritative set of rules, as can be seen by Helena Blavatsky’s forming of the esoteric section, which addresses only ‘true adepts’ (Haas).
- b) By *inclusion* we mean paths that lead to the construction of a new type of community in which the believers are integrated through the means of a new relationship with the Divine within a different social setting (Facchini, Mersch). Alternatively, inclusion might also refer to the inclusion of new sources within the canon of traditions referred to by a community, merging them with other sources to form a unified whole in which the boundaries between “old” and “new”, “own” and “others”, are no longer easily discernable (Facchini, Haas, Höke).
- c) By *seclusion* we denote the willing separation of one or a few individuals either from the main religious body or from worldly affairs. Alternatively, it can indicate the way a group of believers leave another group in order to profess a higher truth. Seclusion implies always a choice about space and the selection of ascetic, sometimes bodily, practices (Facchini, Höke, Mersch, Mueller-Schauenburg). For example, contemplation was set apart from

common places. This withdrawal is not necessarily physical. In the case of religious enthusiasm, Jews sought ‘mystical experiences’ in specific, identified places, such as the graves of holy men. In Fox’s narrative, God does not dwell in ‘dreadful places’ (churches) but lies within the heart of every man and woman (Facchini). In the case of Benedict XIII, the abandoned person shows a remarkable attitude of detachment from the struggle of power (Müller-Schauenburg).

Seclusion may also be regarded as a way to contextualise traditional models of seclusion, insisting on the importance of remaining in the world, and amongst worldly affairs, instead of renouncing it. Thus, the Brahmo Samaj aimed for a “householder” religion (*grihastha*), calling radical forms of ascetism (*samnyasa*) sinful (Höke).

These terms are related to the relationship of the individual towards God, as well as the relationship of the individual towards society or the social realm. This already shows that the distinction that we advance here is artificial and only useful for clarifying our perspective, as all the aspects mentioned are actually closely interrelated.

The ideas of the self that are articulated within our case studies are often rather broken or fragmented (Facchini, Hoeke). They might even lead to an outright rejection of a personal, visible self, which can be expressed by anonymity or a call for “impersonality” (Haas, Mersch, Müller-Schauenburg). Some of the practices described in these chapters also imply an elitist attitude to the search for the Divine or religious tradition. Walking the edges is not a model for the masses.