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Introduction

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The religious diversity that came into being in the sixteenth century heavily affected the European communities. As an inevitable consequence of the fracture within the ‘Christian World’, the role of the church in society had to be redefined. Also, massive religiously motivated violence within societies and between states was evoked. It led and forced hundred thousands of people to leave their homes and flee elsewhere. Thus, flight and migration became distinctive features of the religious and social history of early modern Europe.

During the last decades flight and migration became central issues in historical research. Historians explored how immigrant communities settled in various countries and coexisted with new and foreign neighbours. These studies e.g. showed the economic contributions of these communities to their host societies and how exile affected the identity of many religious groups. In these studies, that were mainly oriented to local and regional contexts, the focus was on the social history of the refugees. Further, some studies were devoted to the connection between flight and confessionalisation. Striking, however, are the clear confessional and disciplinary borders present in most of the research.

Only recently, attempts have been undertaken to overcome these disciplinary and confessional borders in studies that display a more comparative approach in analyzing the phenomenon of migration. It was also the explicit aim of the conference “Exile and religious identity in early modern Europe”, held in the Johannes a Lasco Library in Emden (June 28–30, 2017), to advance the study of migration from comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives, and to bring forward methodological issues related to studying migration.

This special issue of the *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* presents a selection of contributions to the Emden conference that have been reworked into articles. These studies clearly display the huge variety of the phenomenon of (voluntary or forced) migration, and the interplay of various circumstances leading to migration, as is clearly illustrated in “Religious Refugees and Confessional Migrants: Blurring the Difference” by Tadhg O’ Hannrachain, and “Flucht hinter den „osmanischen Vorhang“. Glaubensflüchtlinge in Siebenbürgen” by Ulrich Wien. Here, attention is

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also given to the various relations between refugee communities and their political and ecclesiastical environments, in local as well as regional perspectives.

Because of this entanglement with the immediate environment and the huge local (political, economic, and social) differences between the various places where migrants lived, there also existed a huge variety of opinions amongst and even within refugee communities, and by no means uniformity of opinion. These experiences were of great influence on the formation of churches, as can be concluded from Jesse Spohnholz's "Exile Experiences and the Transformations of Religious Cultures in the Sixteenth Century: Wesel, London, Emden, and Frankenthal".

The conference also aimed at broadening the scope of research into (religious) migration, being sometimes rather one-sided, and looking beyond the borders of research with its focus on specific groups, and neglecting others. An example is "Patterns of exile from and return to the Habsburg Low Countries during the Revolt (1566–1609)" by Violet Soen and Yves Junot, showing how the focus in research on religious migration in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century has been on protestants migrating from the Low Countries, neglecting almost completely catholic migration, but also of protestants migrating back to where they originally fled from.

In her contribution "Refugee 'nations' and empire-building in the early modern period" Susanne Lachenicht pleads to integrate the history of religious refugees into imperial history in a broad comparative and entangled perspective. This incorporates these minority groups into a larger historical context and demonstrates their history as agents who were important in the processes of empire-building and the development of economies, in contrast with their victimization. It radically changes the image of religious refugees in the history of early modern Europe.

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