Religion, Community, Borders

Tensions and Interactions between Religious, Cultural and National Imaginaries in Neoliberal Times. An Introduction

Laurens ten Kate

University of Humanistic Studies
Post Box 797, 3500 AT Utrecht, The Netherlands
ltk@uvh.nl

Ernst van den Hemel

Humanities Cluster, KNAW
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, The Netherlands
ernst.van.den.hemel2@meertens.knaw.nl

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The 21st century so far has turned out to be a time of crossroads. On the one hand, neoliberal globalization continues to shape the way in which people, thoughts, ideas flow and interconnect. On the other hand, nationally or culturally oriented identifications are on the rise. This issue of the *Journal for Religion and Transformation* addresses how these junctions between the liquidity and the tenacity of borders determine the way in which the present and its “sense” is imagined, with a particular emphasis on the role of religious and secular worldviews.

The issue consists of ten articles; each of them departs from the framework of social imaginaries theory, and explores how the current interdisciplinary scholarship on social imaginaries, whether theoretical or empirical, may contribute to the study of this double bind of fluid as well as solid borders that seems to be one of the hallmarks of our era. The aim of the authors is to reboot the conceptual understanding of borders and of the crises they bring about. In particular, the authors focus on the way in which borders are imagined as

outlines of old and new communities, as these communities feed on religious and secular worldview traditions.

The editors and contributors want to stimulate new research combining religious studies, border studies, media studies, and globalization studies starting from the framework of social imaginaries. Let us first briefly unpack this framework (section 1) before we go over to the central themes of the issue: religion, community, borders (section 2). Towards the end of this introduction we offer an overview of the contents (section 3).

1 Theorizing Social Imaginaries: The Image as Practice and as Space

1.1 *Pluralism in a Super-diverse World*

Across the globe, people live in increasingly diverse communities. Diversity, in all its expressions of religion, race, gender, class, sexuality etc. has become highly complex, changeable and contestable, with intersecting, overlapping and disruptive practices and modes of identification. This condition has been theorized for instance as super-diversity¹ or as indicating a need for what Connolly coins as multidimensional pluralism.² Connolly analyses a world in which traditional connections – the nation, the church or any religion or worldview based organization, the village or town area, the football club etc. – are no more or at least less determining for the way one leads life.

Our communities lose their self-evident presence and impact, they become “idle” and “inoperative”, as Nancy analyses in his pioneering essay of 1982, *The Inoperative Community*. According to Nancy, this by no means paves the way for straightforward individualism, but it implies that new ways of “being-in-common”³ emerge that are hybrid, fluid, temporary, local, in short, finite.⁴

This raises urgent questions for religious, political and cultural studies. How can we rethink the dynamics of our times in their complexity, hybridity, and indeed also animosity? Can a critical dialogue across the boundaries of the “Global North” and “Global South” and an interdisciplinary understanding of the dynamics of in- and exclusion contribute to a deep and multidimensional pluralism, involving an active, dialogical analysis and a productive ethos of political engagement across boundaries of differences? Here, the concept of social imaginaries can serve as a new lens for analysis.

1 Vertovec 2007; Ten Kate 2018, pp. 119–120.

2 Connolly 2011.

3 Nancy 1991b.

4 Nancy 1991a [1982].

1.2 *Social Imaginaries and the Grand Narratives*

In philosophy and cultural and religious studies, the concept of imaginaries has gained ground. It is used in several contexts: social imaginaries, political imaginaries, violent imaginaries, techno-scientific imaginaries, environmental imaginaries, etc. These uses can be traced back to the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), and Charles Taylor (2004), seeking to understand (late) modern societies. The first cohesive attempt to bring together various research practices working with the concept of imaginaries and to formulate a state of the art was the winter issue of *Public Culture*, in 2002. That issue was the outcome of about ten years of research and debate in the Center for Transcultural Studies (CTS), a center counting Arjun Appadurai, Craig Calhoun, Charles Taylor and Michael Warner among its members. Scholarship continued intensively after this break off in 2002, leading to the journal and book series *Social Imaginaries*, founded in 2015 and published by ZetaBooks, and to the international research consortium Simagine, that started its work in 2017.

In Simagine's first publication project, the volume *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*,⁵ Vandevoordt, Clycq and Verschraegen (2018) argue that the concept of social imaginaries harbors at least two potential contributions to the study of culture. Firstly, social imaginaries refer to particular ideas and narratives flowing within the social world, visions of one's own society, and the interrelations that are part of it. Because of imaginaries' substantial fluidity, Vandevoordt et al. see in the concept a useful heuristic tool for the analysis of culture's contemporary complexities.⁶ This crucial fluidity involves a certain creativity of imagination with which many people stand in the social world. Taylor defines a social imaginary as "the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain."⁷ A social imaginary is about "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."⁸

Secondly, the concept of social imaginaries helps to draw attention to the creative power of individual agents in dealing with different, overlapping institutions and social fields. Influential though social imaginaries are, it is possible for people to take a critical distance, reflect and evaluate them and go

⁵ See Alma/Vanheeswijck 2018.

⁶ Strauss 2006.

⁷ Taylor 2004, p. 6.

⁸ Taylor 2004, p. 23.

through transformative processes. The concept of social imaginaries allows for recognizing the strong impact of social processes without assuming social determinism.

In both cases, social imaginaries reflect the so-called “end of the grand narratives.” They pinpoint new ways in which many people relate to their social worlds and to the worldview traditions that underly them more freely than they related to solid ideological configurations not so long ago. They take account of the super-diverse and pluralistic condition of our time mentioned above. Worldview traditions have not disappeared, but they are in a constant process of transformation in which the agents are transformed too, time and again. Baumann addresses this situation with the concept of liquidity.⁹

So social imaginaries are often implicitly shared sets of assumptions of a certain socio-cultural group, involving moral or religious claims about the society they are part of: claims about the basic values of society and how it should be organized. This is the way Taylor approaches the definition of social imaginaries. He therefore defines them as incorporating “the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice.”¹⁰

In the same vein, Appadurai studies these collective imaginative practices as aspirations toward a better life. Such aspirations hint at a deep capacity to aspire active in any human, according to Appadurai.¹¹ They strongly influence people’s daily lived contexts. Social imaginaries imply an orientation towards what we consider to be “good,” towards “the values we hold most precious”¹². We would add: if imaginaries follow the structure of aspiration and desire, these values are precisely what is imagined and thus created *in* the imaginaries; they are hardly pre-given entities to be strived for.

These analyses and definitions bring us to the conclusion that the concept of social imaginaries helps us to bridge the secular-religious divide, by giving insight in the way every worldview is both rooted in and productive of shared practices and implicit images of self and world. This is an important challenge to the assumption of “worldview neutrality” with regard to secular states. By banishing worldview issues to the private domain, dominant social imaginaries of neoliberalism and capitalism escape critical reflection and are allowed predominance in all areas of life in taken for granted ways. We will return to this in the next section.

9 Baumann 1999.

10 Taylor 2007, p. 172.

11 Appadurai 2013.

12 Goodman 2014, p. 2.

1.3 *Social or Shared Imaginaries?*

However, a critical remark is necessary here. The addition “social” in the concept of imaginaries should not be read as referring to society and to the social world only. Social is not “societal,” but rather in a broader sense, “shared.” Imaginaries are shared claims at work on many levels of human relations: society as a whole, but also smaller communities, like the aforementioned examples of a town area or village, a sport club or, one could add, a family. Moreover, underlining the shared character of imaginaries implies that they are versatile, even chaotic in their functioning. The terms “common” and “collective” in Taylor’s definition do not entirely do justice to the fact that many imaginaries are less dependent on a particular group, or are at work in very loose and intangible pluralities. Think of national (“We Dutch”) or international imaginaries (“We Europeans”), of imaginaries related to a profession (“That’s a typical doctor’s perspective”; “Only a philosopher could reason like that”) or to a hobby (“We motor-bikers”). Think also of digital communities, that are usually highly flexible and elusive, like a Facebook-group. Particularly in the last two decades, the reality of imaginaries mingles material or physical with virtual or digital modes of being. And we should add an important note here: we can also share imaginaries with and within ourselves, for we never simply belong and adhere to just one common understanding or common practice. People combining an intercultural or cross-cultural mix of backgrounds form an obvious example here. With the increase of global migration their numbers are growing fast.

Consequently, we should treat the adjective “social” in social imaginaries with some nuance. Imaginaries are shared on many existential levels, and do not only express claims about society.

1.4 *Social Imaginaries as Practices and Spaces*

If social imaginaries fill the gap left behind by the grand narratives, they do so in a specific way. They “work” in a much more compelling way than the images – symbols, truths, values etc. – brought about by the solid ideological structure of the grand narratives.

In the opening essay of the aforementioned special issue of *Public Culture*, Dilip Gaonkar ventures an important first definition of imaginaries. They are “ways of understanding the social that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life.”¹³ The importance of this description lies in the fact that Gaonkar treats imaginaries as more than “ways of understanding” through imagination *with regard to* the world; imaginaries *become* worlds in themselves, created by humans so that they can temporarily dwell in them – live

13 Gaonkar 2002, p. 4. See also Latré 2018, pp. 48–51.

in them. We can conclude that already in 2002, the productive and spatial features of imaginaries have been emphasized in scholarship. It is precisely in these two features that imaginaries differ from images: they are the “becoming active and spatial” of images: they mark a certain verbalization of the noun “image.” Gaonkar is inspired by Castoriadis’s groundwork in this when he cites the latter’s formulation: imaginaries work “as an enabling but not fully explorable symbolic matrix within which people imagine and act as world-making collective agents.”¹⁴ The next step in this series of innovative definitions would then be: this becoming a verb of imaginaries implies that they are not only practices carried out by human agents, but ... are agents themselves. Taylor rightly stresses the fact that imaginaries are practices, as we saw above: practices that create spaces in which humans act, and in which they “are acted”... *by the practice, by the space – by the world that has just been invented, imagined.* In this sense Taylor varies on Wittgenstein’s famous dictum by stating that imaginaries “hold us captive.”¹⁵

Already in the 1970’s, Ricœur introduced the term “productive imagination”, in which the *practice* of imagination involves the interplay between the image and the imagining person, opening up the spatial side of imaginaries – although Ricœur does not use the concept itself.¹⁶ And in the 1990’s, Appadurai has further developed this research by conceptualizing imaginaries as transformative spaces in a more and more globalizing world that features the dominance of the visual and the digital. He opposes these transformative spaces of imagination to static worldview systems. In these spaces the modern self invents and re-invents itself. Like Nancy, he claims that this highly unstable self should not be understood along the lines of individualism, but that it opens up new – unstable – forms of community.

In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai shows “that the work of the imagination [...] is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.”¹⁷ For this “work of imagination”, the concept of social imaginaries was developed in the decades following *Modernity at Large*. According to Appadurai, the contemporary world is characterized by a new role for imagination in social life, strongly reinforced by the rise of

14 Gaonkar 2002, p. 1.

15 Taylor 2004, p. 26.

16 See on Ricœur’s importance for the theory of imaginaries Michael Staudigl’s and Héctor Acero Ferrer’s contributions in this issue. Staudigl refers to George Taylor (2006) who demonstrates that the notion of productive imagination runs through Ricœur’s entire work.

17 Appadurai 1996, p. 4.

electronic media that offer new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds. Appadurai argues that electronic media are resources “or experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons.”¹⁸ Self-imagining becomes an everyday social project. Additionally, and often correlated with electronic mediation, mass migration is a central force in impelling or even compelling the work of the imagination. In contemporary societies we live with a plurality of imagined worlds. The work of the imagination is transformed through the everyday cultural practice of contemporary people living in super-diverse societies and influences their capacity to aspire for a better life in decisive ways. Appadurai speaks of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes, or “mediascapes.”

It is not the givenness of things that powers ordinary lives today, but the possibilities that the media suggest are available. So, for Appadurai, self-images and world images are continually (re)negotiated in a dynamic that he opposes to static worldviews which offer a sense of security and stability.

The transformative power of imagination in imaginaries can be both constructive and destructive. Imaginaries as fuel for collective action can be used in violent ways in service of extremist world images that spread over the world by the intensive use of social media. Also, the dominance of Western imaginaries in the media, in economy, and in politics on a worldwide scale has destructive effects that are often hard to admit for Western politicians.

Just as Appadurai uses the metaphor of space to understand the imagination, social imaginaries can be understood in terms of spaces as well, in which people on the one hand create images of their being and on the other hand are created by these images. Images guide their daily practices and the stories they tell about them. When people find ways to articulate and share these images, they may be challenged, negotiated and reconstructed, opening new spaces for communication and action. In that sense, social imaginaries are spaces with flexible boundaries. Articulation and recognition of what people aspire to in their social imaginaries is a key factor in democratic processes that allow for social change.

It is this complex dynamic of imaginaries as practices and spaces/worlds that we aim to apply to the impact of borders in our time – in this Introduction (section 2) and throughout this issue.¹⁹

18 Appadurai 1996, p. 3.

19 See for an elaborate philosophical analysis of the relation between imaginaries and worlds also Ten Kate 2018, esp. pp. 125–135.

2 **Borders as Spaces: The Crisis of Neoliberalism and the Challenge of Religious and Secular Worldviews**

In an open, market-oriented world determined by a global economy, national borders are seen as obstacles. The endeavor to obliterate borders for goods – less so for people – is supported by what may be named the last “grand narrative” of our time: neoliberalism. This narrative favors the retreat of governmental influence on the public space and features a radical belief in market forces as the prime condition and shape of late modern societies. Since markets tend to expand into a transnational practice, neoliberalism has always had an ambiguous relation to borders. They are obstacles, but at the same time the political economy of the liberal nation state, with its well-defined territorial and often also cultural/religious borders, is considered a sound foundation for global capitalism. Pioneering theorists of neoliberalism like Von Hayek and Friedman²⁰ did not advocate the abolition of the nation state but sought to attribute a new meaning to it.

This ambiguity with regard to borders, however, does not prevent neoliberalism's narrative to proclaim an increasingly unified world, and a humanity at last in an intensely intimate state of contact with itself. A prominent theme of contemporary political discourse is that of the nation-state's inexorable decline and of a corresponding shift towards a liberalized world economy, an inclusive and trans-border polity, greater cultural integration and social interdependence, and a condition of communicative and informational liberty that refuses to be contained by territorial limits. The world invoked here is one in which populations, trade, and information move easily across the frontiers that once circumscribed localities, regions, or countries, and where social governance and cultural production are increasingly functioning beyond the institutions or agents of particular states. This world is where attachment is no longer limited to ethnic affiliation, religious tradition or geographical proximity; it is where polity no longer roots itself in the idea of national self-determination; it is where authority has become dispersed; where finite identities, singularities, exceptions and deviations have become displaced onto a subject that has finally attained a universal and infinite human community; and where eventually only the wealthy profit from this new global belonging, as many critics currently emphasize, sometimes in the language of anger and despair.²¹

In this place without geography, in this domain of the global citizen, the immanence of the world is taken as a substratum that can now surface. This

20 See below, note 30.

21 Shivani 2016.

arousal or emergence is often associated with the uninhibited movement of data across a uniform and undifferentiated planetary space. In this universal space, we are told, there has emerged a population that is at last – in an ecstasy of affiliation – communing with itself.

These universal claims about contemporary socio-cultural life are deeply interwoven with modernity, and with its ideals of freedom and autonomy. In this sense, the neoliberal critique of national borders and of their alleged meaning for socio-cultural life is a fundamental feature of the modern striving for self-realization in a world of infinite possibilities for its entrepreneurship. Hence, neoliberalism is not a political system one may simply adopt and defend or reject and replace. It is strongly connected with and informed by phantasmas of infinity and infinite growth and “social acceleration”²² that lie at the heart of modern culture. Despite the fact that, in the 21st century, neoliberalism’s claims about a liberal, universal and secular “end of history” are becoming increasingly unconvincing, we need to study this fundamental impact of neoliberalist thought a bit closer.

2.1 *Neoliberalism and the DNA of Modernity: The End of Politics?*

Neo-liberalism is deeply rooted in our culture because it is a successful attempt to announce and effectuate the end of politics: not the end of political systems, of policy and strategy – neoliberalism itself is a political system – but the end of the political dimension of human life on an existential and social level. In other words, it does not mark the end of *la politique*, but of *le politique* – an important distinction in post-war French political philosophy: in English politics versus the political.

Arendt states that the political refers to the importance and significance of a public space – realm or sphere in Arendt’s vocabulary – in which people appear to each other through action and speech, in connection or in conflict, and in which they are protected in this mutual exposure to each other *by* that space.²³ The state, power, the law are in this sense subservient to the possibility

²² Rosa 2015.

²³ Arendt 1958, p. 176: “In speech and action [...] human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.” Arendt also uses the concept of “(self)disclosure” (e.g. Arendt 1958, p. 175) and “self-revelation” (e.g. Arendt 1958, p. 242) in connection with this “appearing to each other.” In a more fundamental context, Arendt later relates this concept of appearance to human thinking, which she expressly wishes to see as an activity, and indeed a political activity. In *Thinking* (Arendt 1971) we read in the opening part, entitled “Appearance”: “The world men are born into contains many things [...], all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled [...]. Nothing could appear [...] if recipients of appearance did not exist – living creatures [...]” (Arendt 1971, p. 19).

of appearing to each other: the possibility of the political. The meta-narrative of neoliberalism sees the world as a neoliberal market in which every person is an entrepreneur of his or her existence. This vision has far-reaching consequences for the public space, which is gradually being undermined. We refer to the functionalization, formalization, minimization and deculturalization of the public services – education, care, communication for example – as initiated by a withdrawing government.²⁴

Neoliberalism is under pressure, precisely because the discontent about this all-controlling narrative is growing. This is reflected in the scholarship on neoliberalism. In many studies the focus lies on a thorough exploration of the crisis of neoliberalism: the three core themes addressed here are its serious consequences for the world: political instability, social inequality and climatic destruction.²⁵ Other works are still critical, but translate the crisis into what we call, under inspiration of the American economist Philip Mirowski, the DNA-thesis. These thinkers mainly analyse why and how neoliberal thinking is in our cultural DNA ... so that it is not so simple to reject and abolish it. Neoliberalism is “inevitable”²⁶, a “secret revolution,”²⁷ and it is elusive and hard to identify as a separate phenomenon. It is closely linked to the modern ideal of freedom and autonomy of the Enlightenment²⁸, or to the power of modern belief in progress, leading to utopias that inevitably involve their own violence.

It also has many faces, as most scholars rightly indicate. It originated, just before the Second World War, as a humanizing correction to the harsh capitalist liberalism that led to the crisis of the 1930's. It re-emerged in the 1980's in a less humane form, in the harsh austerity policies of Thatcher and Reagan, but in the 1990's it was given a new face, that of “progressive neo-liberalism” that

24 That neoliberalism also entails privatization, neutralization and therefore depoliticization of culture, philosophy of life and religion is a theme that receives less emphasis in literature. We cannot elaborate on this here, but we do point to a relevant study. Ton Groeneweg (Groeneweg 2016) states: “The [neoliberal] promise of free association with culture creates the illusion that we are independent of cultural conditioning [...]. That is a trend that, on the contrary, surrenders us blindly to the complex manipulations of the modern cultural industry, in the delusion that we would be the “free” users of it.” (Groeneweg 2016, p. 12; our translation) Here, Groeneweg compares the neoliberal marketing of culture with the way in which radicalizing Islam in Europe is becoming detached from its own cultural base, a process that has been analysed in detail by the French sociologist Olivier Roy (Roy 2010).

25 See for example the highly critical but analytical study by Duménil/Lévy 2011, as well as Hudson 2012. A more offensive manifesto is found in Smith 2010.

26 Biebricher 2012.

27 Brown 2015.

28 Ten Kate 2019.

wanted to give people opportunities to free them from the patronage of the welfare state and that had to lead to empowerment and diversity – two magic words of this period. The political (September 11, 2001) and economic developments (the 2008 financial crisis) would then have meant that we are moving away from the dreams and ambitions of this progressive neo-liberalism to “authoritarian neoliberalism.”²⁹

Whoever talks about a genetic code, about DNA-strings, talks about something that is completely obvious: it goes without saying. That is precisely what the principle of the market has meanwhile become in contemporary politics: natural. From left to right, whether one is for or against Islam, for or against taking in refugees – a market-oriented approach seems almost universally supported. It is therefore not surprising – though still remarkable – that there is much *criticism* of neoliberalism in the literature, but almost no explicit *defense* of it. A plea for the market is apparently not necessary, the market simply *is*. The almost canonical manifestos of market belief are already old: they date from the 1960's to the 1980's. They are referred to time and again, as if they have settled the case once and for all: the works of Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek.³⁰

The power of neoliberalism does not lie in its economic or political successes – there are just as many catastrophes – but in the fact that it fits in seamlessly with a modern worldview. Freedom and progress have just been mentioned above. Both are closely related.

The modern concept of freedom is fed by the modern experience of freedom as a desire: a desire for permanent self-realization. The idea that people are first and foremost entrepreneurial beings who can control the world and their fellow human beings in that world, should not only be understood economically: the entrepreneur who seeks markets and creates consumers with the aim to strengthen his or her competitive position. The *homo susceptor* – modern radicalization of the *homo faber* – is above all an *existential* category: the human being as an entrepreneur of his own existence. My life is a big project of which I am the project leader. Taylor speaks in this context of a basic characteristic of the modern self, which he thinks of as a mechanism of closure for all that is outside of that self. If there is an outside, it must be manipulated and interiorized. The term he uses for this is that of the “buffered self.”³¹ The discourse of self-realization against the other and against the world is the opposite of the dynamic of self-invention explored by Appadurai as a key feature

29 Fraser 2017, and Bruff 2014.

30 Friedman 1990 and 2002; and Von Hayek 2003.

31 Taylor 2007.

of imaginaries: that is, of the uncertain deferral of identity that is at stake *within* the worlds of imagination and always in relation – shared – with the other(s).

This freedom as self-realization underlying neoliberalism immediately converts into self-development: the realization of the self is never finished, it must be performed time and again, and with growth, with “profit.” The modern belief in progress as a central utopian element of modern history must be thought on an existential level as well: my existence is only successful if I grow. We grow in our career – performance interviews are now called development interviews – but also in our relationship in our hobbies and sports, etc. Self-development in addition to self-realization, are part of the order of instrumentality. Horkheimer and Adorno diagnosed this instrumentality in their cultural-historical analysis of the Enlightenment, and Bataille diagnosed it in the same period in an existential-phenomenological analysis of the tension between law and excess, normality and excess, lived by people daily.³² Everything is an instrument through which I can achieve something; nothing has value in itself, everything must always lead to something else. Neoliberal thinking names this instrumentality profit: nice what you have done or made here, but what is the profit?

We may conclude that neoliberalism is not a specific application of modernity, it *is* modernity. Whoever criticizes neo-liberalism criticizes modern life with its principles and ideals – criticizes oneself.

2.2 *Borders and Globalization*

The neoliberal celebration of global belonging is motivated by a process of secularization that becomes almost self-fulfilling: globalization relies on the idea that the secular mode of existence has become the only possible way to live in the world, individually and collectively. Religion, or rather, formulated in a broader way, worldview and sense, can no longer be meaningful in the global public space, that is, in the global market. The claim that these borders informed by traditions – whether nationalist, religious, cultural, or in any blend of these – are “something of the past” invokes what Roy has coined a dangerous deculturation of the world by means of deracination.³³ This deculturation produces the aggressive and often violent reappropriation of borders, whether territorial or imaginary, and often in a complex combination of both: examples are Switzerland’s isolationist policy, the neo-insulationist desire underlying Brexit, or the wall between the USA and Mexico. The return of nationalism in Western Europe, United States, Russia, India, as well as the renewed emphasis

32 Horkheimer and Adorno 1947; Bataille 1988.

33 Roy 2010.

on the role of religion in national identity in these different settings, have given increased urgency to the study of borders and religion. Under the header of 'populism', a complex phenomenon has arisen involving a volatile mix of nativism, economic protectionism and culturalized racism that often does not fit neatly in the categories ordinarily used to describe political movements. What to make of simultaneous protectionist policies as well as the unleashing of predatory capitalism by the Trump administration? Or, what to make of populist discourse in which the West is both Judeo-Christian and secular? How to make sense of the appeal these apparently contradictory discourses have on populations worldwide? How to understand the repercussions for present and future victims of this worldwide resurgence of some borders whilst others continue to be erased?

The field of border studies has provided a productive partner for studying this process. In this field the return of borders is not anathema to neoliberal globalization, it is constitutive of it. The undifferentiated, secularized planetary space described above, that expels culture and religion from the public space into the private realm, appears to gradually transform itself into what populist leaders call the monster of "wild globalization." But if borders need to be analysed beyond the logic of demarcation, either to be superseded or reclaimed, how to think them? Can the answers to this difficult question offer a third approach between the discourses of neoliberalism and of populism, an approach that explores and rethinks the complex relations between borders and religion?

2.3 *Borders as Imaginaries*

In this issue, the authors depart from the hypothesis that inspires the consortium Simagine: borders are imaginary spaces in which people temporarily settle, only to travel and migrate again, and in which they are always looking for themselves, imagining themselves, re-inventing themselves. Borders are permanent yet fluid zones of migration in which everyone participates, as Nancy has suggested³⁴; they are imagined orders of intersubjective communication, as Harari has recently claimed³⁵. Or as Balibar has argued, borders are nowadays not merely located at the border, but they take place a little bit everywhere, so that it becomes sensible to turn "border" into a verb, "bordering"³⁶:

34 Nancy 2016.

35 Harari 2016.

36 Cf. Mezzadra/Neilson 2013.

The borders of new sociopolitical entities, in which an attempt is being made to preserve all the functions of the sovereignty of the state, are no longer entirely situated at the outer limit of territories; they are dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled.³⁷

Bordering implies a reciprocal dynamic: we create them, and at the same time we are created by them. This is true for all narratives, images and symbols, practices and rituals, values and truths of which social imaginaries consist. To illustrate this, Taylor uses the example of a demonstration. In a protest even antagonistic participants inhabit a shared framework: taking place in public spaces, “we are always already in some kind of conversation with each other.” This conversation is a dialogue in a radical sense: even a violent protest “figures the addressee as one who can be, must be, reasoned with.”³⁸ To conclude, a social imaginary does not need to be consciously held; it is rather part of a backdrop against which people act out and share commonality.

2.4 *Essential Tensions to be Investigated*

Let us propose two specific fields of tension that play a central role in the exchanges and debates of the following pages.

1) If borders are social imaginaries in which the logic of identity, unity and universality – whether informed by the “market” or by the “people” – is put under pressure, then the traditional border between *ethnos* and *demos*: between the sovereignty of the nation state and the universal order of law (rights, equality, justice) and public space, as Arendt thinks this, will have to be reformulated. It may well be that the primary condition of our time lies in a permanent border crossing between these two opposites. Can *ethnos* and *demos* be seen as two major political imaginaries of our time, that are engaged in a tension, if not a clash?³⁹ Or is the complex border between the two exactly the border between identity (*ethnos*) and imaginary (*demos*)? And where do we place religion, as it appears and re-appears in the “secular age” in many disguises, in this field of tensions? Does it belong to either side of the border, or does it cover both sides?

2) The majority of scholars on social imaginaries, like Taylor, analyse a change in the dominant social imaginary of the West: from a situation in which being religious was the obvious status quo to it being an option open to the

37 Balibar 2003, p. 1.

38 Taylor 2007, p. 26 (both quotations).

39 See on this presumed clash Kahn 2009, and Theo W.A. de Wit's contribution below.

free choice of the individual self. Productive as they are for theorizing social imaginaries as a vital condition of late modern culture, such analyses have oriented themselves predominantly on the Western European world and on Latin Christendom within that world. What, if we keep Balibar's diagnosis about the dispersed nature of borders in mind, happens to our understanding of *global* social imaginaries? Does a change of perspective announce itself as soon as scholarship departs from narratives of secularization in the "secular age", and focuses on the flows and closures of bordering across the globe? What imaginaries are contested, now that borders are both effaced and highlighted anew? Shouldn't one *decolonize* the epistemic order in which modernity's imaginaries are claimed to be universal?⁴⁰

3) If borders are social imaginaries in which migration, transformation and the creative reshaping of existences is the prime condition, then a sharp distinction between migrant and refugee is necessary. This requires a rethinking of Europe – as a geographic continent and as an imaginary space: both with borders that increasingly become uncertain and insecure ...⁴¹ Nancy invites us to do so, referring to Arendt:

Today, in the Mediterranean, around the American-Mexican border or the borders of Colombia or Syria, what is taking place there has nothing to do with migration. That is a false word. What is taking place there is expulsion and flight towards refugee camps. 72 years ago, Hannah Arendt wrote that the word "immigrant" is a misleading and concealing term for the more embarrassing term "refugee." She describes the refugee as a pariah, produced by the suspension or destruction of rights. Migration is not a suspension of rights, but it opens up the transformation of rights, and parallel to this, the transformation of identities, of thoughts, horizons, languages, colors and music.⁴²

Currently this important distinction between migration and flight is increasingly blurred. Nancy appears to think migration is an almost anthropological condition of our time (exemplified by mass travel, internet and digital media), if not of humankind proper; a certain affirmation of the world as a pluralism of worlds, beyond identifying borders, is at stake here. Flight, on the contrary, is an involuntary action due to tragic fate, and refers to the vital human need for a "home," for belonging, for protecting borders – for a community that does not

⁴⁰ See on this challenge Nabil Echchaibi's article below.

⁴¹ See on this Kurt Appel's article below.

⁴² Nancy 2016, p. 17 [our translation].

rely on *having* identities in common but on *being-in-common* within plural imaginaries.

Today, is one witnessing a clash parallel to the one sketched above (1.), a clash between these two modes of existence: that of infinite plurality, versatility, hybridity and super-diversity, and that of finite singularity, identity through traditions, and the relative stability of the place and the local? And again: what about the meanings of contemporary religion when it comes to this clash? Is it on either side, or can it go beyond and cross the borders?

3 Overview of Contents

Part I of this issue "Religion, Community, Borders" is entitled:

"Bordering Imaginaries I: Migration, Populism and the Crises of the Neoliberal Nation State."

Here our central theme is approached from the perspective of political and media theory, with focuses on the tensions between material and virtual borders and migration, the resurgence of newly imagined communities, and the embarrassments of neoliberalism.

Simagine member Nabil Echchaibi opens Part I with an analysis of the mediatization of the plight of migrants and asylum-seekers who arrive on Europe's southern shore to "fit" within new cultural and national borders. The result is a precariousness of empathy which decides whose suffering is recognized and whose suffering disappears behind a flurry of images. Using the works of Caribbean poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant, Echchaibi argues for a different interpretation and poetics of the border, one which does not nullify rootedness but refutes the tyranny of the "totalitarian root."

Ernst van den Hemel, also member of the Simagine consortium, then investigates the ways in which these bordering imaginaries in recent times – in Europe, North America or Brazil – have led to the emergence of a populist movement claiming that religious-cultural identity needs to be safeguarded and enshrined in policy. The new imaginary borders that demarcate and enact this identity reduce it to what is claimed as the "Judeo-Christian tradition." As this frame is gaining traction, Van den Hemel presents a case study on the "old" Christian-democratic political discourse and their protagonists: the question is posed what this emphasis on the public importance of religion entails for these politicians who see themselves as the guardians of religious-cultural identity.

Guest author Theo W.A. de Wit maps contemporary predicaments leading to "the end of politics" as the outcome of the clash between the need

for a homeland with its claims to a distinguishing culture and religion, and the democratic state with its claim to a universal rule of law. He develops his argument in dialogue with the Bulgarian political theorist Ivan Krastev and the American philosopher of law Paul W. Kahn. De Wit concludes that this binary opposition does not reflect the interconnectedness of love and universality and of local groundedness and openness towards the other.

Concluding Part I, consortium member Stewart Hoover investigates how Protestantism became the moral center of American public life. Investigating how the Reformation's emphasis on mediation enabled a moral framework to sink into the collective moral imagination of the United States, and in dialogue with (among many others) the cultural anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, Hoover stresses the need to historicize current moral reflexes and the imaginaries they lead toward. The author concludes that religion-inflected discourses of nationalism and identity must be analyzed as functions of Protestant social and media instrumentality.

Our second, more elaborate part is entitled:

"Bordering Imaginaries II: The Need for Conceptual and Historiographical Innovation."

We deepen our understanding of the issues and dilemma's outlined in Part I by focusing on the conceptual challenges and historiographical roots of and alternatives to the way in which we can imagine the global condition of multi-dimensional pluralism.

Michael Staudigl, another of our guest authors, gives a first thorough conceptualization of the notions of borders and imaginaries, against the backdrop of Ricœur's thought. He does so by problematizing the relation between violence and religion, urgent in a postsecular era. Staudigl proposes an approach to the crisis of borders starting from the analysis of the "eclipse of moral emotions" due to modern individualism. He finishes by demonstrating that we need a new understanding of the power of "religious imagination" as a truly *poietic* human capacity that persists beyond our secularist projections of religion and that may be used productively to disrupt secular modernity's "self-incurred tutelage" (Kant). In this way we can expose both the violence of our beloved political ideals of freedom and sovereignty, as well as their repercussions on religious practice.

Guest author Hans Schelkshorn bases his contribution on his study *Entgrenzungen* (Dissolving Borders; 2015) and offers a second fundamental conceptualization of the notion of borders against the background of a critical analysis of the discourse on "modernity." He highlights how modernity has shaped processes of bordering and how current, often unconsciously held

conceptualizations of borders are part of a religious-cultural framework with roots dating back to Antiquity. He devotes special attention to the Renaissance thinker Francisco de Vitoria, who laid the foundations for a new modern cosmopolitanism that dissolves borders. In dialogue with early modern thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, Francis Bacon and John Locke and late modern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas he explores modernity's approach to borders.

Starting, like Staudigl, from Paul Ricoeur's work on imagination, guest author Héctor Acero Ferrer explores why and how human relations are fundamentally determined by borders: that is, by the tension between encounter and separation. Ricoeur's take on collective imagination and human interaction can be a tool to unearth some of the key conceptual features of this encounter-separation tension, thus pointing to ways in which social imaginaries shape the liquidity and modality of borders in increasingly diverse communities. Ricoeur's analysis of the development of cultural imaginaries through the opposed yet complementary forces of ideology and utopia, and his exploration of mutual recognition come together in an understanding of human persons – and communities – capable of imagining enlarged spaces of recognition. Inspired by the Irish/American philosopher Richard Kearney Acero Ferrer complements his analyses with an account of narrative imagination that allows one to articulate the narrative origins of concrete human realities and practices, such as borders and border-setting.

Dirk Schuster, one of our guest authors as well, takes a closer look at religious communities and at the way they produce imagined exclusive borders on the one hand and open up the possibility to transcend the borders set by a communitarian structure. His case studies revolve around the Christian tradition: the ritual of baptism in its many meanings and forms. He confronts the Christian capacity to either set or transgress borders of identity with the role Christian communities played in the epoch of Nazi-Germany: the "Deutsche Christen" and the "Bekennende Kirche." Schuster coins the notion of "Exclusivist border crossings" and investigates how this notion may explain the complex ways in which religious arguments exclude people from entering a religious space such as salvation when the access criteria are linked to birth-related conditions. He does so by entering a conversation with the religious scholar Kim Knott.

Guest author Marin Terpstra argues that underlying many conceptualizations of bordering there is a failed philosophical understanding of "distinctions." Instead of imagining borders in opposition to borderlessness, one should concentrate on distinctions, that mark quite simply the "material

space” the world is made off. Terpstra argues that certain distinctions become so intense that they develop into borders. In dialogue with the mathematician and writer George Spencer Brown and the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (who de-intensify the concept of distinctions by focusing on their logical and contingent forms) and with the political philosopher Carl Schmitt (who intensifies the concept of distinctions by making them a potential cause of conflict), he raises the question how the continuum of distinctions shapes our present and tempts us to simplify our understanding into clear-cut borders.

Finally, in a concluding essay, Simagine member Kurt Appel pinpoints what the future holds for Europe, provided we live in a present in which often ill-understood imaginary heritages of our past lead to polarization in the present. Appel argues that, in light of current predicaments, a way forward can be found in recovering the political theology of Europe and its internal and external borders, not so much to insist on returning to the roots of the Christian West, but to prevent the past from closing down the present. Appel states that the “vocation” of Christianity consists in providing an exit strategy to closed social and symbolic worlds. This does not create an abstract borderlessness, but sets in motion a continuous process of creative openings and shifts in which public space becomes concrete as a place of ever new approaches, exits and inclusions.

4 About the International Research Consortium Simagine

The NWO-funded international consortium Simagine, running over a period of three years from July 2017 to July 2020, is a platform for research exchange that has launched a research program combining theoretical and empirical methods. It aims to explore the role of social imaginaries in a pluralistic, globalizing world, with a special focus on the issue of imaginary borders between religion, secularity and decoloniality, and with special attention to the role of art in social imaginaries.

Simagine consists of eleven European, African and American partner universities: Bloemfontein in South-Africa, Boulder CO and St. Barbara in the USA, Cambridge in the UK, and Vienna in Austria, Brussels and Antwerpen in Belgium, and Utrecht and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht is Simagine’s host university. Simagine is directed and coordinated by Hans Alma and Laurens ten Kate.

Biography

Laurens ten Kate (1958) holds degrees in theology and philosophy. He publishes in the fields of the philosophy of culture, religious studies and globalization theory. He has specialized in French post-structuralist thought and deconstruction theory, and has written on Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, Foucault, Derrida, Nancy, Sloterdijk and Ch. Taylor. He published as chief editor *Re-treating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy* (2012). He is co-editor and co-author of *The World in Theory: Derrida, Nancy and the Ends of Globalization* (with Philip Leonard and Peter Gratton, Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming) and *The Music of Theology: Language – Space – Silence* (with Andrew Hass and Mattias Martinson, Routledge, forthcoming).

Ten Kate is associate professor of philosophy and religious studies, and an endowed professor of liberal religion and humanism, both at the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht. With Hans Alma, he has initiated and coordinates the international NWO-funded research consortium SIMAGINE: Social imaginaries between secularity and religion in a globalizing world.

Ernst van den Hemel is a postdoctoral researcher at the Humanities Cluster of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has worked on Calvinism and the right to resistance, the heritagization of religion and the sacralization of heritage and on religious nationalism. His current research project is entitled Populism, Religion and Social Media.

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