

# Religion in Meaning Making and Boundary Work: Theoretical Explorations

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**Abstract** Based on the articles brought together for this special issue, this article proposes a transversal analysis and theoretical elaboration of the question of the uses of religious elements for meaning making and boundary work. In order to do so, we will first propose a sociocultural psychological perspective to examine meaning making dynamics. Second, we will apply a boundary work perspective, as recently developed in the social sciences, on the organization of religious differences. The first considers religious elements as resources that can be used by people to orient themselves in time and the social space, to interpret and guide action, and to create new forms of life. The second approach proposes an analysis of uses of religious stuff in order to understand how boundaries between groups are created, transgressed or dissolved as well as to explore the link between religion and power. Our argument is that the articulation of these two approaches can itself offer a rich theoretical frame to apprehend religions in contemporary society.

**Keywords** Religion · Boundary work · Meaning making

## Introduction

The starting point for this special issue was the insight that religions, that can be described as complex social realities and as specific symbolic systems (Belzen 2010a, b; Geertz 1972), have become a social issue and have tremendously changed during the last decades, in Europe as well as elsewhere in the world. Among the transformations depicted by scholars, the following ones grounded our enquiry and constitute the background of this special issue.

First, religious phenomena have become global or transnational, due to new means of communication, the circulation of people, and changes in world political and

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economic balance (Levitt 2007; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010; Plüss 2009). These changes are without doubt linked to enhanced globalization processes and migration: Migration provides transnational networks that support the transport of religious messages from local to global audiences and, vice-versa, religion supports creating transnational networks. Examples for this are the Pentecostal churches as described by Hüwelmeier (2013). However, transnationalization of religion is not a new phenomenon as such: maintaining and forging religious ties across national borders has long been part of many religions. Christianity, for instance, has for centuries sought new followers across the globe; Judaism can also be seen as a long established transnational religion. However, in the last decades not only mobility and migration accelerated, but the development of new communication and transport technologies intensified these globalized dynamics on their turn (Vertovec 2009). From this statement follows a first series of questions: What are the consequences for individuals and groups in various host societies being embedded in such transnational religious networks? In which way is their religious meaning making linked to this transnationalization and how are the boundaries of such transnational religions negotiated?

Second, societies such as those in Europe have become pluralistic from a religious point of view. Numerous studies have pointed to the growing diversity of religious forms, beliefs and practices: new religious spiritualities have become sometimes visible and also new religions have been introduced by migrants (Baumann and Stolz 2007; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2005). This diversification of religious forms raises important questions about the recognition of the diverse groups, about boundaries between the religious groups, about processes of inclusion and exclusion, and also about how meaning making takes place under such conditions.

Third and simultaneously, established and traditional religions have lost their institutional importance for many people, while religion (or religiosity) has become at the same time more individualized – a kind of bricolage, *à la carte*, do-it-yourself-religion. Nevertheless, religion still can have an important place in the private life of people (Berger et al. 1999; Stolz and Baumann 2007; Davie 2000; Willaime 1995). Some scholars use the term “post-secularism” to acknowledge that despite the marked decrease in the attendance of institutionalized, Christian churches in many European and North American countries, some forms of belief and religions practice remain prominent, albeit much altered, among the general population (Gorski and Ates 2008; Wilcox 2012). This raises the question of the individualization of religious practices and belonging – a paradox in itself given the fact that religions have, etymologically (if not historically) the function to relate (*religere*), to link people together and through history. Hence, if people and groups develop new, personalized religiosities, how can these provide with socially shared meaning, recognition and belonging?

Finally, religious phenomena and diversity have become perceived increasingly as a problem, and as a consequence, they have generated dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. The most prominent example might be Islam which, in the general discourse, appears alternately as a problem for security and linked to terrorism (Bhatia, 2007), or as an obstacle for migrant integration and a peril for gender equality through practices stereotypically perceived as forced marriages and the subordination of Muslim women (Behloul 2009; Casanova 2004; Cesari 2010). Unequal gender relations among Muslims are in European countries often identified

as the core problem of diversified societies; yet a large number of social scientists responded critically towards such essentializing – reducing people to some imaginary cultural or ethnical “essence” (e. g. Wagner et al. 2009) - and stereotyping discourse (Razack 2004; Moira and Phillips 2008; Roggeband and Verloo 2007; Baghdadi 2010; Dahinden et al. 2012). As will be shown, essentializing Muslim features and linking them to the idea of a culturally induced gender inequality can be considered as a kind of transnationalization of religion. Hence, in Australian Cartoons, as shown by Moloney et al. (2013), Muslims are depicted almost exclusively with religious markers (veil, beards for men), projecting the Muslim women as the ‘other’, symbolically as a victim of archaic gender-oppressive practices within Muslim society; we are here faced with transnationalized social representations about what Muslims are, and how they behave. In this context it is interesting to ask which and what effects such stigmatization has on the Muslim population and how they cope with it, again in terms of meaning making and boundary work.

Consequently and given these observed transformations in the realm of religion, it appears to be of scientific importance to ask how religious differences are organized under these new conditions. In order to do so we adopt a pragmatic stance. Rather than asking what religion is and what it becomes, we ask why religious has such an importance in the public and private space. From a pragmatic stance, ideas have to be evaluated according to what they enable, such as ways they transform our gaze, people’s actions, or the reality itself (Gillespie and Zittoun 2010; James 1904). In the realm of the new forms of religiosities, the pragmatic questions become: what do groups and people do when they use religious elements? What are the consequences of these uses, for themselves, for their environment? What is changed? What facilitates and impedes these uses?

More specifically, to capture the phenomena explored through this interdisciplinary special issue, we will address the uses of religious elements at two levels. At one level, we will examine how people, mostly in interaction with others and objects, are engaged in rendering their world meaningful; and the question will be that of *uses of religious elements for meaning making*. At another level, we will examine how groups and institutions use religious elements in their mutual relations, and the question will be that of *uses of religious elements for boundary work*.

In order to do so, we will first propose a sociocultural psychological perspective to examine meaning making dynamics. Second, we will apply a boundary work perspective, as recently developed in the social sciences, on the organization of religious differences. The first considers religious elements as resources that can be used by people to orient themselves in time and the social space, to interpret and guide action, and to create new forms of life. The second approach proposes an analysis of uses of religious stuff in order to understand how boundaries between groups are created, transgressed or dissolved as well as to explore the link between religion and power. Finally, and this will be our final argument, the articulation of these two approaches can itself offer a rich theoretical frame to apprehend religions in contemporary society.

This ‘extroduction’ thus proposes both a transversal analysis and a theoretical elaboration based on the articles brought together for this special issue. We will first shortly introduce the main ideas of each of the two theoretical approaches, and through these, highlight the theoretical contributions of the articles. We then discuss the theoretical contribution, for the social sciences, of an analysis combining meaning

and boundary work. Such approach, we argue, allows for considering religious phenomena as complex dynamic and historical phenomena, in terms of *boundaries* and *surface* – processes of exclusion and inclusion and intergroup relations on the one hand, and individual and sociocultural meaning making on the other hand.

## Religion as A Resource for Meaning Making

A first way to approach religion as social and cultural phenomena is to examine how its components – or religious elements – are used within a group, by individuals, to give content to their identities. Hence, religious elements are used as means to create meaning – to render the world, self, others and one’s actions readable, valuable and manageable.

### Religions and Meaning Making: A Sociocultural Psychological Approach

Psychology has a long tradition of examining the role of religion in people’s life, and the psychology of religions suffers from the same issues than psychology in general: exploration of simple causalities rather than complex phenomena, static measures of conduct rather than dynamic understanding of processes, focus on mental life without consideration of social and cultural processes, etc. (see Belzen 2010a, b). A socio-cultural psychological perspective can contribute to our understanding of the current role of religion in society as it articulates individual actions together with social and cultural dynamics. One of the core issues in that respect is how a person’s capacities of thinking, feeling and acting, which are always developed in a social environment and shaped by culture, can also always be new, creative, unique, and thus participate to the development of culture itself (Branco and Valsiner 2012; Zittoun 2012a). One way to examine the mutual relations of the person, others and the socially constructed world, is to examine *processes of meaning making*. Meaning making designates the process by which human beings make the world readable, valuable and actionable, through the use of semiotic means (Bruner 1990; Valsiner 1998a, 2007). Semiotic means include simple signs – things to designate something else (Peirce 1878) - but also complex systems such as languages and narrative structures (Vygotsky 1986). Signs designate something within certain aspects; signs render communication possible among humans, in the here and now of interactions, but also through time and space. Semiotic systems have realizations in the world – texts, paintings, architecture, movements, etc. –but also find a form of translation in mind. It is because the environment can be “read” as specific displays of semiotic means – shapes, colours, volumes, symbols, texts, etc. – that people can make sense of them and orient their activities within. Also, it is through the mediation of partly internalized semiotic elements that people can organise the diversity of their experience – identify events as similar or different than others, label them and group them in categories, but also connect present to past, and create possible futures. Thanks to people’s internalization of semiotic means, they can guide their own thinking, beliefs and actions (Valsiner 1998b, 2007; Van der Veer 2012; Vygotsky 1986). One can thus control one’s hunger because it is not yet dinner time or because the available food is forbidden. On the other hand, by establishing some shared semiotic systems, groups of people can also agree upon certain interpretations of the world, and generalize them into values or full

*Weltanschauungen* which then ground the organisation of the civil society, political or educational systems, etc.

In a given environment, however, or for a given socially fixed meaning, there is always room for personal interpretation – every person apprehends a shared discourse from a unique point in time and space, rich from a personal history of past experiences. Hence, it is useful to distinguish between the *socially shared meaning* of a given cultural element or symbol, and *the personal sense* it acquires in a specific occurrence for a specific person (Rochex 1998; Vygotsky 1986).

From a sociocultural perspective, consequently, religions appear to provide people with powerful social and cultural means to read their environment, guide their actions or orient their decisions. As meaning systems, religions usually are organized around a small number of core principles and values, from which are deduced or to which are attached a large number of more or less explicit rules about how to live a good life. These rules can thus organize a variety of relations: the person's relation to the deity, to others (in general, men, women, elders, etc.), to herself, to material aspects of existence (food, clothing, etc.), to time and space. Religious systems create a space of values, with some actions being seen as better, wiser, purer, than others. Because rules and values are abstract, many religious traditions develop narratives – tales, allegories, biblical vignettes, drama to be ritualized, or stories about the gods – to convey them and give them some flesh. In turn, people who are aware of the narratives or the rules of one (or more) religious systems live in a world swishing with meanings. Engaging in practical and material actions reactivates these narratives, principles and ultimately values (Beckstead 2012; Josephs 2007; Zittoun 2006a). For a religious person, choosing one's lunch dish is not only about satisfying one's hunger or one's senses; it is also a matter of honoring a god, respecting a taboo, reactivating various narratives, and creating a certain vision of the world. More, a person who does not know or does not adhere to the entire religious system of a given group in time and history can still mobilize a specific aspect of that system, according to her understanding of its meaning, or the sense she confers to it in a specific circumstances. Hence, one can decide to wear a kippa or a hijab without knowing all the theological discussions about them; it is enough for that person to know that these objects are loosely connected to a meaning system, to use them to institute their belonging to a given group. Hence how a person understands or uses such cultural elements and their shared meanings participates to the personal sense these take for him or her. People thus use religious elements from religious groups to which they belong (by birth, by choice...) or also from other available religious traditions, and use them in various forms of religious "bricolage" (Levi-Strauss 1966). Doing so, they draw on the shared meaning of these elements within a given group, but also, on the meanings attached to these elements by outer groups, as an analysis in terms of boundary work reveals, and they confer specific sense to these uses.

In the papers reunited for this special issue the question of religious elements used for collective and individual meaning making appears under various forms, as we will first show. Yet meaning making, if it is an open-ended process, is also always socially guided; it can meet opposite meanings, be prevented or catalyzed. Also, religious systems are evolving through time, and the meaning they convey depend on various groups, their social and political locations. Hence we will need to examine the more complex dynamics to which sense-making is articulated.

## Contributions of the Articles

### *Using Religious Elements to Make Sense of Everyday Life*

All the papers in this special issue assume the complexity and the historicity of our world; because of the circulations of people and knowledge, there is no “pure” form of a given religious community; these are always reshaped in the light of their times, political situations, intergroup dynamics, and so on. Baucal and Zittoun (2013) propose that religious elements can be seen as used by people to orchestrate their lives in a world of culture. Hence, they suggest, on a daily basis, people might use religious elements which they have internalized or that are present in their environment to support and orient their lives. Wearing a kippa is first, for a religious Jew, to follow a recommendation of the Talmud and to respect god (Endelstein and Ryan 2013). Regular church or Mosque attendance can be seen as comparable religious daily life organizers. Here, religious meaning making is unproblematic if not trivial: it is a matter of conferring sense to specific events, moments, actions, through existing religious meanings.

### *Using Religious Elements to Make Sense of Ruptures*

The need for meaning becomes salient when taken for granted daily activities or the interpersonal or intrapersonal status quo are disrupted. Disruptions introduce holes in the fabric of time continuity, and self-consistency. Experienced ruptures can be due to personal or interpersonal events - such as the sickness of a beloved one, or a migration, or a collective event, such as 9/11. Religious elements are excellent candidates for individual and collective meaning making.

It is thus after the illness of her son that Mrs Ha (Hüwelmeier 2013) reread her past reactions when facing religious elements as meaningful: her former dislike of a Buddha motive becomes retrospectively a religious offense, which could be used to make sense of an otherwise unbearably unfair event – the illness of a child. It is also this event that will trigger Mrs Ha’s more active search for religious meaning, and which leads us to a first community, and then a second, until she creates a church in which she can propose her own interpretations of the bible and other elements. Mrs Ha’s trajectory can be read as the search for the proper religious system to generate her own sense making – of course, in the limits of existing systems.

In effect, this search is however done within groups of people who share a similar fate – they are all women migrants from Vietnam to Germany. More generally, migration brings people to experience ruptures, for which religious elements are often used as symbolic resources. In that sense, the groups of young Muslims observed by Holtz et al. (2013) can be seen as using religious elements to maintain a sense of continuity beyond the experienced rupture of migration, expressed as a wish to reestablish, if not create, their “origin” or “cultural heritage”. Similarly, see for instance the uses of religious elements in migration among Greeks in the UK (Kadianaki 2009), Somalis in Egypt (Mahmoud 2009), etc.

Rupture experienced by a person or a group can also affect others around them. It is typically the case when a rupture who affects a large population: as they might be displaced or migrate, secondary ruptures might affect their host or neighbors, as it is the case with Australians who start to feel threatened by numerous immigrants (Moloney et al. 2013). In that case, the population’s attempt to confer meaning to



the new immigrants can be read as an example of “turning the unfamiliar into familiar” manifested by the processes of social representations, identified by Moscovici (2000, 2008). The work of symbolic representing can thus be done both by using existing religious elements, or by creating new symbolic constructs to be used by people as resources. Cartoons that represent beards (a metonymy for religious Muslims) as tracking devices, or represent an alcohol ban (similarly a metonymy for Islam which forbids the consummation of alcohol) as a national attack, associate new semiotic sets to anodyne cultural elements: indication of practicing Islam designate an attack to Australian citizens. Of course, how individuals will use such images and their attached representations is another matter.

### *Meaning Making as Historical Process*

As a resource for meaning making religious elements participate in the organization of time and histories. In a rather trivial way, religions are usually providing individuals and groups with a structure of time: a guidance of daily routines, a yearly calendar of holidays, or a theory of the origins and end of time. In that sense religions seem to be a-temporal or immobile elements: they maintain continuity beyond the daily alterations. However, the papers collected for this special issue rather show the dynamic and historical nature of uses of religious stuff for meaning making.

The story of Mrs Ha described by Hüwelmeier (2013) shows the malleability of religion through time. Used as a “ductile resource” (Greco Morasso and Zittoun Submitted paper) as it can be remodeled and defined according to one’s migrant trajectory, one’s need and the others’ response. Here, Mrs Ha’s uses of religious resources for sense making brings her to a new identity definition, which allows her to more creative uses of religious resources and the definition of new forms of actions, and so on, in a generative circle that allows her to move through time and in various social spaces.

Read at a larger scale, religious elements can be used to reconnect self to the history of a group, while at the same time renewing and transforming these. The reinvention of Hassidism thus enables Jews from Northern Africa to use a dress code and religious traditions developed for centuries in central and eastern Europe (Endelstein and Ryan 2013), thus inscribing their own action in a new filiation, that is, reinventing one’s collective past and opening new possible collective futures.

Hence, using existing religious elements in new historical time brings people to transform the socially accepted meaning of various practices, as the evolution of the meaning of the hijab shows – thus, “professional, educated women who combine marriage and child rearing with paid employment” use to hijab to express their social success while being good Muslims (Endelstein and Ryan 2013).

Seen in time and history, religious elements can be used to confer sense to situation and to communicate certain meaning to others; sense and meaning are dialogical – they are answers to certain situations and will provoke other answers. In addition, this process transforms the meaning of the religious elements being used themselves.

### *Meaning Making and Social and Cultural Guidance*

How people will use available religious elements, and for what purpose they will do so, also depends from wider social and political forces. As will be shown later in this

discussion, intergroup relationships, institutional arrangements as well as national or international policies render some uses of religious elements more salient, attractive, necessary or impossible.

Hüwelmeier (2011, 2013) demonstrates that the complex historical and political transformations, before and after the dismantlement of the Eastern Block, are at the origin of several waves of Vietnamese migration in Germany and other countries. These people were in need of new “portable” religious practices and sociality, to render their changing reality meaningful and actionable; within this context, the Pentecostal church, with its networked structure and core principles that are highly open to reinterpretation offered a welcome set of resources. Hence a political and ideological movement creating a new form of diaspora was also the condition for the use of a religious tradition in order to create rapidly evolving meaning fitting in a wide diversity of local niches.

The strong articulation between institutional guidelines and local uses of religions is at the core of the analysis of Duemmler and Nagel (2013). In terms of meaning making, it might be said that institutions, strongly promoting core values - interreligious or ecumenical encounters - encourage the creation of specific social formats, in which people will engage in “interreligious dialogue”. For this, they draw on religious elements from their respective traditions - Christianity, Judaism or Islam - to develop discourses and confer meaning to issues such as “‘the character of Joseph’, or ‘strong woman in the world religions’”. In other words, a social context promoting one specific value, ecumenical discussion, brings people to use religious elements to create a plurality of coexisting interpretations. This, in turn, is supposed to transform people’s value - so as tolerate plurality.

The sociocultural space for using religious elements for meaning making is finally also shaped by more informal modes of diffusion of values. The Australian case described by Moloney et al. (2013) shows the catalytic role of the media in collective meaning making, by creating a field of promoted interpretation of a given situation. The daily newspapers participate in the evolution of the semiosphere, creating new symbolic repertoires, which then strongly channels the way in which people might interpret specific events. Hence, in a world saturated with images of bearded terrorist, “wearing a beard” immediately takes a specific meaning for a majority of people reasonably exposed to the media. Hence, in the evolving transnational semiosphere, when young Muslim men express “if you go a shopping mall and your beard is too long” (Holtz et al. 2013), they also reveal that the meaning conferred to beards has changed valence in this complex game: from having a positive value (e.g., respecting religious recommendation), wearing a beard becomes negative - a stigma. Such value has indeed been collectively selected by a redundant discourse, diffracted through the media and all over the world, feeding in social representations, which then reifies and naturalizes the image of the dangerous bearded man - even for beard-wearer themselves.

### *Meaning Making and Dynamic of Recognition*

Like boundary making, the process of interpreting reality is always at the interplay of personal, group and societal determination. This is why meaning making processes are dependent from dynamics of recognition - and vice versa.



In his classical studies on catholic groups, Deconchy (1973, 1980) showed that members of groups that feel threatened by non-recognition adhered more strongly to core beliefs and held more rigid interpretation of religious texts. Reversely, when they felt more recognized and less threatened, these groups released their adherence to core beliefs, and their member could confer personal and innovative sense to these texts. In other words, people's uses of religious elements are more creative and open when they feel more recognized in their belonging and their particular modes of meaning making. In that respect, young Muslims' "reactive religious awakening" described by Holtz et al. (2013) can be seen as the more rigid use of religious resources to generate a more traditional meaning of their existential situation as a reaction to social non-recognition. The extreme case of the Serbian wars is also such an example (Baucal and Zittoun 2013). The more tolerant institutional context described by Duemmler and Nagel (2013) allows people to confer more open interpretation and uses of religious stuff, and the paradoxically tolerant context in which the Pentecost church develops might be facilitating the rapid religious innovation described by Hüwelmeier (2013).

Such dynamics of recognition and meaning making have to be understood in their complexity and in their context: the Serbian case deeply articulates ethnicity and religious issues in a particular historical context. To have a better grasp of these dynamics we need to complement this first analysis with the help of a second theoretical lens, that of boundary work.

## Religion as A Resource for Boundary Work

### The Boundary Paradigm: The Social Organization of 'Differences'

We have seen that religious elements can be used by individuals to give content to identities, to create meaning about the world, the self and others. However these meaning making processes always take place in interaction and dialogically with other individuals or groups as well as within given institutional, political and social contexts. It is on this analytical level of collective group formation processes where the idea of boundary work on behalf of religious elements connects with the formerly presented theoretical ideas.

The idea of boundary work has come to play a key role in important lines of scholarship throughout the social sciences, and it opens new theoretical insights into the organization and production of social differences (like religious differences) and social identity (Pachucki et al. 2007). Social differences (i.e. between Christians and Muslims or Jews), social identities and corresponding boundary processes emerge historically and need to be considered in the context of state, national ideology and collective history. Boundary work involves a broad range of actors, i.e. the nation-state, media, individuals in daily interactions, etc., and is about the dichotomization between "us" and "them" and about the way how these perceived differences result in group formation processes, either in terms of intergroup relations, or on the administrative state or nation-state level.

The notion of boundary has been used throughout the social sciences, rendering social categorization visible across a wide variety of contexts. In general, boundaries

are understood as having both social and symbolic dimensions; Symbolic boundaries have been defined as “*conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people and practices. [... They] also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership*”. In addition, social boundaries are “*objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities*” (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). Hence, the theoretical work on boundaries has some similarity with social psychological studies on intergroup dynamics (Holtz et al. 2013; Tajfel 1981a, b). In daily interaction, actors are involved in struggles over social distinctions and classifications through which symbolic boundaries can shift. When symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon, however, they can take on a constraining character and they can become social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168).

Much work has been done specifically on *ethnic* boundary work, following the seminal work of Frederik Barth (1969) particularly in the context of migration (i.e. Bail 2008; Wimmer 2009; Alba 2005; Bauböck 1998; Wimmer 2008). There has also been limited research on *gendered* boundary work (i.e. Gerson and Peiss 1985) and much less on *religious* boundary work. However, we argue, following Brubaker (2012: 4), that religion serves as a way of identification, a way of social organization and a way of framing political claims similarly we know it from ethnicity or gender: All three of them represent common ways, of “*identifying oneself and others, of constructing sameness and difference and situating and placing oneself in relation to others*” (ibid. 4) – again, be it on nation-state level or on the dimension of intergroup relations. Religion gives therefore the possibility to label fundamental social groups and to induce group formation processes. Religion incorporates a set of schemas for making sense of the social world.

Boundary making is necessarily *relational* as in-groups and out-groups are the result of a twin process of group identification and external social categorization (Jenkins 1997). On the one hand, group identification refers to the ways individuals differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of similarity and shared belonging within the in-group. Such communality is a form of monopolistic social closure; it defines membership, eligibility and access. For the closure of group boundaries to operate, any “*cultural stuff*” (Barth 1969: 15) can provide a basis and resource: language, ritual, kinship, lifestyle, religion or gender representations. Boundary making refers therefore to subjectively meaningful differences and similarities which do not signify real conformity, but which are central to communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*), an idea that goes back to Max Weber (1996 [1922]). The second process, external categorization, is intimately bound up with power relations and relates to the capacity of one group to successfully impose its categories of ascription upon another group of people and to the resources which the categorized collectivity can draw upon to resist that imposition, if need be. This means that the boundary perspective allows bringing in questions of *power and dominance*, in a comparative perspective, when it comes to religion. Which religions are recognized on a state or administrative level, or, which groups are stigmatized, is a question of boundaries. Hence, religion can be considered in contemporary societies as an important resource for processes of exclusion and inclusion.

Following this rationale, religion is here understood as being the result of such social categorization processes and its institutionalization and therefore as

the result of the boundaries created between groups. Boundaries between religious groups can be marked – in this logic – by different “cultural stuff”: Religious elements might be used to mark the boundary (i.e. the veil or the beard), but also other elements, like gender relations, or ethnic elements (‘culture’) provide resources in order to mark such religious boundaries and to produce ‘differences’.

The articles gathered in this special issue also contribute to our understanding of religion as a resource for boundary work, as we will now show.

### Contributions of the Articles

#### *Religious Boundary Work at Group Level: Relationality Highlighted in Reactions on Stigmatization*

There is a growing body of social science research showing how members of stigmatized groups understand and respond to stigmatization, misrecognition, racism and discrimination. We argue that the boundary paradigm can contribute to this body of literature, mainly because of its focus on interaction and relationality. Such an emphasis is promising in understanding the responses of discriminated and stereotyped groups and individuals. External categorization by the majority of minority groups will trigger different reactions among minorities, they might agree with the classification (in this case category corresponds to group), they might disagree and apply different coping strategies which often result in attempts to deal with the boundaries. Such interactional and relational boundary processes are particularly relevant if boundaries are created by discriminating and stigmatizing minority groups – as it is the case with Muslims or Jews. Two articles of this volume contribute to these insights by showing first, how everyday responses to stigmatization trigger transformation of group boundaries and second, how cultural and structural contexts enable and constrain individual and group responses to stigmatization and discrimination. Hence, we argue that responses to stigmatization are closely anchored in the national and local contexts and the cultural repertoires that are variously available across contexts (see for this argument also Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). Understanding responses to stigmatization requires considering the contextually dependent formation of collective identities: how ‘us’ and ‘them’ are mutually and relationally defined, and how individuals and groups engage in boundary work in responding to stigmatization.

The article of Endelstein and Ryan (2013) focuses on clothing to analyse the presentation and performance of religious bodies in urban public spaces – Muslims in London and Jews in Paris – in a context of heightened stigmatisation of these religious minorities. Religious visibility is obviously differently considered at the political or legal level depending upon national context and politics of cultural and religious diversity governance. Both groups experience stigmatization, although the two different contexts reflect different socio-political debates: Religious Jews are perceived as a threat to French secularism by bringing visible religiosity into public space and in so doing awakening deep seated anti-Semitism which has been part of European societies for centuries. Similarly, religious Muslims in Britain may be perceived by some people as supporters of Islamic terrorism, but in addition, through

their visible difference and associated religious practices, Muslims have become embroiled in public debates about ‘parallel lives’ and stigmatized in the context of a backlash against diversity and multiculturalism to foster a shared sense of British national identity (Grillo 2010). In spite of the differences of the French and British contexts, the authors highlight how clothing plays a key role as a symbolic marker of group belonging and boundaries and religious groups clothing might be regarded as an external manifestation of their group membership. As a marker of group boundary, clothing functions as a visual means of differentiating in-group-members from outsiders. At the same time, Endelstein and Ryan report how Muslim women in London and Jewish men in France wearing religious clothing were personally affected by verbal and physical attacks in public places, examples are being spat at, called names in the streets, injuries, aggressive glances, etc.. Muslim women in London suggested that Islamophobia had increased in recent years and they feel stigmatized as threatening figures. It is often the public space which becomes a site of tension: Here the women’s and men’s high visible clothing renders them as potentially threatening and disruptive figures. By adopting the hijab, Muslim women in London do not intend to withdraw themselves from the British society, as the authors write. On the contrary, these are educated, professionally active women who combine marriage and child rearing with paid employment and who are convinced that their religious clothing gives them the opportunity to navigate public life while asserting their identity as ‘good Muslims’.

How do the Jews and Muslims react? While some Jews have decided to hide their kippa under a flat-cap or not wear it in public spaces, the data suggest that rather than being cowed by the threat of violence, a significant part of Muslims and Jews are adopting religious dress partly as a form of resistance. Not wearing or hide a Kippa can be interpreted as an attempt to *cross* the boundary – a version of individual-level assimilation (Zolberg and Woon 1999) – as they attempt to move from one group – the Jews – to the other – the majority – without changing the boundary itself. Adopting religious dress as a form of resistance on the other hand is a way to *reinforce* the boundary as well as enhance *internal cohesion* within the in-group and can be interpreted as a way to find positive social identity (Tajfel 1981a, b). Finally, some Jews are thinking about emigrating to Israel – leaving the stigmatizing context.

The main strategy of the visible veiled women was that they have been keen to give a positive impression of their religion to non-Muslims observers by assessing an identity as ‘good Muslim’, by being nice to non-Muslims, by showing them that they are educated and integrated into the labour market and so on. In other terms, by putting forward the communalities with the non-Muslim population these strategies aim at *blurring* the boundary trying to render less distinct the social profile of the boundary and to cloud the clarity of the social distinction. This strategy could also be interpreted as attempts of *normative inversion* (Wimmer 2008) trying to show that their own group is not inferior to that of the majority, by putting forward the ‘good values’ of the ingroup. However, if these strategies will be successful is another question and some studies show that in the context of bright boundaries such outsider strategies will not be accepted by the majority (Duemmler et al. 2010). Interestingly enough, the London study did not report assimilation-strategies from the side of the veiled women, which might be explained by the long anchored British tradition of group rights and group recognition in the context of multicultural politics (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).

Holtz et al. (2013) also clearly demonstrate the relational nature of boundary work. They analysed discourses of discrimination and feelings of national and religious attachments of Muslims, mainly Turks, living in Germany. While only few Muslims described personal discrimination by non-Muslim Germans, they almost all complained about being collectively discriminated – this was true for non-religious and non-practicing Muslims as well as religious ones. This generalized feeling of stigmatization triggered different reactions.

A first reaction is to emphasize their ethnic identities. This strategy can be understood by the context: Given the essentializing discourse of the German majority about the Muslims – and general discourses about migration (Radtke 1996; Ramm 2010) – and the actual debate about the ‘integration failure’ of Muslims, it does not come as a surprise that the Muslims fall also back into an essentialized way of thinking. Turkish-German-Muslims found it impossible to be accepted by the Germans as ‘Germans’ even when they were German citizens given the essentialized perception of ‘Germaness’ by the autochthon population. In revenge, they essentialize their ‘ethnic origin’ using often biological metaphors (Turkish roots, blood, etc., being 30 % German and 70 % Turk). Here stigmatization triggered the reaction to reinforce the *ethnic boundary* between ‘Germans’ and ‘Turks’ attempting to get rid of the religious boundary – Christian versus Islam – which is even more negatively marked. They emphasize an ethnic belonging in order to get rid of the stigmatization as Muslims.

One group of Muslims – the religious ones – reinforced on the contrary their Muslim affiliation rendering the boundary towards the majority even brighter which gives them positive social identity. Again, this strategy has to be embedded in the local context: Different scholars observed a Islamization of migrants by the German majority, meaning that the public debate on immigrants shifted recently from the perception of the Turks in terms of an ethnic category toward their perception as Muslims (Schiffauer 2007; Ramm 2010). Relationally, this reinforced boundary has the consequence that religious Muslims might resort to their Muslim roots as cultural resources for identity constructions and self-worth – the transnationalized category of ‘Islam’ can here directly fuel self-recognition (while brightening the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims) – at least for those who consider themselves as ‘truly Muslims’ – in contrast to those whom they consider as secularized and not true believers. In this case ethnic or national boundaries are embraced by the category of Islam: These Muslims apply a strategy of universalizing Muslim brotherhood presenting it as a morally superior religion, transnationally anchored.

Younger participants, who grew up in Germany, face the problem that they feel not only rejected by the ‘Germans’, but also by Turks when visiting relatives in Turkey. In this case, religion is also a resource, as it can help to prove that they did not lose their ‘cultural heritage’ and still belong to the culture of their grand-parents. Hence, Islam is here emphasized, less in terms of religiosity, but in terms of ‘correct’ religious practices which can bridge the gap between the Turks in Germany and those in Turkey. Emphasising the religious boundary is here a way to gain access and recognition among the Turks back at home.

Finally, others cope with their feeling of discrimination by engaging in local politics or sport activities that allows them to attribute themselves a hyphenated identity (Hylland Eriksen 2003) as Turkish-German, coping strategies aiming thus at *blurring* the boundary between ‘Germans’ and Muslim Turks.

This examples points to the need to include the ‘cultural repertoires’ and how they are mobilized in reaction to stigmatization into the analysis: In France the question of laïcité – a strict separation between state and religion - and assimilation is dominant in this ‘cultural repertoire’. In the UK the so-called failure of multiculturalism and a long established tradition of ‘group rights’ is the playground stigmatized groups have to deal with in their boundary work. In Germany essentialized, Herderian ideas (the assumption that each national or ethnic group would naturally have it’s culture, be connected by a common solidarity and a common spirit (Wimmer 2009) lead to essentializing and biologically coloured debates. All these contexts influence differently the boundary work of the majority population and the strategies of the stigmatized groups.

### *Religious Governance and Boundary Work*

Some of the articles in the volume contribute to the studies investigating religious governance on state and administrative level, bringing in new insights. The core question here is: how do states deal with the observed growing religious pluralisation? Again, it is obvious that the historical context or how states have historically viewed religion, will have a strong impact on discourses, practices and the ability of religious movements or minorities to find their place at various administrative and state levels (Koenig 2005). However, claims made in the name of religion – or religious groups – can put into question the established relation between religion and state. Given that most states are nowadays confronted with the fact of religious pluralisation, the question raised on a state level is how the growing awareness of religious groups and hence their religious boundaries is dealt with. This is even more true as religious diversity becomes visible when religious groups leave their marginal locations and aspire to establish themselves, as it is the case in most European countries. We propose therefore to study these dynamics in terms boundary work in order to better understand the variety of social and political reactions to religious diversity. The article of Duemmler and Nagel (2013) deals with this issue. They highlight in their comparative analysis between the German Ruhr Area and the Swiss City of Lucern encounters and negotiations of state and societal actors when it comes to religion. Their case study brings to light that in both areas the initiatives aimed at blurring bright boundaries and hierarchies between the locally established and privileged religious congregations and newly arrived religious immigrant groups. The claims which are formulated in the name of religion – or of religious groups – can be understood as a form of politicisation of culture very similarly to those which are made in the name of ethnicity. Claims are made for economic resources, political representation or symbolic and administrative recognition. Such initiatives and claims implicate necessarily the redefinition of established religious boundaries. However, as a matter of fact, as Duemmler and Nagel (20123) show, these initiatives never reflected the whole range of religious diversity in the given area. Some immigrant religions were not fully accredited and given a legitimate status. Sometimes the initiatives resulted in a blurring of religious boundaries while creating simultaneously new bright boundaries towards against others. And, often the initiatives came to be dominated by Christian actors, terms and liturgy – actors of the established religion. Finally, the established religious actors often excluded new religious movements as



not being seen as ‘legitimate’ religions that follow Christian majority culture. In short, investigating the governance of religious diversity through focusing on actual implementations of initiatives in public institutions, such as schools or more informal public settings, suggests both the limits of boundary blurring due to the power position of established religious groups, but also the transformative character of such boundaries.

### *Nation-States, Nationalism, Religion and Boundary Work*

Some articles in this volume contribute to the theoretical understanding of the relation between nation-states and religion – a long-lasting and on-going debate in social science (for a recent overview see Brubaker 2012). Nation-states have historically developed their own approach towards different religions and religious diversity; as a consequence some religions are seen as typical for the national territory and others are perceived as foreign – drawing boundaries between ‘national or established religions’ and others. In some cases, state and religion are closely intertwined (e.g. England, (see Eade 2011), while in other cases they are more separated (e.g. France, US). There is obviously a wide range of possibilities of these articulations which are historically anchored and make part of the national collective imaginary. Hence, the relation between religion and nationalism can designate a whole world of different things. Brubaker (2012) recently proposed a four folded approach in order to study the connection between religion and nationalism: First, to treat religion and nationalism, alongside with ethnicity and race, as *analogous* phenomena. Here we find efforts to define nationalism by specifying its similarity to religion or by characterizing nationalism as a religion; Second, to specify the ways in which *religion helps to explain* things about nationalism, for instance how particular religious traditions have shaped particular forms of nationalism; Third, to treat *religion as a part* of nationalism and elaborate upon the modes of intertwining. And finally to posit a *distinctively religious form of nationalism* (Brubaker 2012, p. 3). We argue that applying a boundary perspective would be a fifth way how this relation can fruitfully studied. Nationalism is - as much as religion - in its core a question of boundary work: National boundaries are created upon specific ideas of a ‘we’ - which includes a historical national myth, an imaginary of a common culture, the idea of community of solidarity – producing internal cohesion. At the same time national boundary work results relationally in definition and hence exclusions of the ‘others’, of those who do not belong in terms of culture, who do not have the right for democratic participation or to profit from the national pool of solidarity (mainly when it comes to welfare-states) (Wimmer 2002).

The question then would be the following: In which way is national boundary work intertwined with religious boundary work? In other terms, in which ways does religion become a resource for national boundary work, or vice versa, how is nationalism used in religious boundary work?

There are examples when national boundaries are created independently of religion – Kosovar nationalism would be an example, which is marked by language and a common myth of suffering. We also find cases when religious boundaries are emptied by nationalism, the Umma – the transnational religious Muslim community - might an example. Another example when religious boundary work takes place without nationalist elements would be Pentecostalism as described by Hüwelmeier in this volume: Pentecostalism constantly incorporates people from different ethnic,

national or language background. Simultaneously, in this case bright boundaries are created in a religious logic, by rejecting ‘traditional’ religious practices, imagined as the ‘Other’ of Pentecostalism. In this case, boundary work reposes solely on a religious logic: Pentecostal Christians separate themselves from all those who, through the veneration of ancestors, through spiritual possession, Buddhism, Catholicism and other religious traditions, fail to take Jesus into their lives and thus are not part of their faith community.

But there are a lot of examples when national and religious boundary work coincides: Ireland comes to one’s mind, or also France with its insistence on secularism, here religion is used as a kind of ‘negative category’ in order to define the national boundaries. In a strong variant, we also find historically examples when a nation is imagined as composed of all and only those who belong to a particular religion, i.e. Israel nationalism is religious in its nature, although there is a struggle marked by a boundary dispute of whether Israel should be defined in religion or national terms. These are all cases when religion becomes a main resource for nationalist claims in order to draw bright boundaries towards other nation-states leading to a coincidence of national and religious boundaries. Baucal and Zittoun (2013) describe another example. They depict the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in political nationalism since the democratization of Serbia showing how religious and national boundary work is intertwined in this case. The Serbian Orthodox Church could reposition itself in the society, legitimizing its role of power by playing on a typical political nationalist register. In public, the Serbian Orthodox church stresses that it constitutes the core essence of Serbian national identity presenting itself as a ‘guardian’ of historically timeless ethnic identity, legitimizing hereby its rights to be a dominant voice in public debates over a wide range of issues, not only religious ones. The Serbian Orthodox church tried to become a primary marker that would enable the Serbs to identify their nationality. Furthermore, the religious and nationalist discourse was used by the Serbian Orthodox Church to frame the conflicts in former Yugoslavia in ethnic terms, and the Church became an important actor in producing ‘nationality’ and creating national groupness and national boundaries.

### Uses of Religions: Meaning Making and Boundary Work Brought Together

What can we learn by bringing together an analysis of uses of religious terms following two perspectives – one in term of meaning making, one in terms of boundary making?

Our initial attempt was to invite and facilitate the articulation of different levels of analysis of the social phenomena of religion: people’s attempt to confer sense to events, negotiation in interpersonal relations, the work of intergroup belonging, themselves positioned within wider social forces, within a field organized by ideological and representational field (Doise 1982; Zittoun and Dahinden 2013). We can identify a set of similarities underlying these approaches as well as a high complementarity.

We argue that both approaches highlight first, the *potential transformative and therefore historically and contextually anchored character* of religion. Religion, as a result of social categorization and institutionalization varies in relation to social and

historical contexts and from one society to another as it is understood as the momentary result of the actor's (individual, nation-state, media, etc.) struggles over classifications about 'us' and 'others'.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein the sociocultural perspective also points towards this dynamic character of religion: Religion provides people with powerful means to give sense to the environment and their actions. However, as people use religious elements in a form of 'bricolage', they are at the same time re-creating and transforming these, therefore using religious elements and transforming the socially accepted meaning of religion. This dynamic and transformative character of religion is highlighted we argue, through the interactional, relational and dialogical perspective of the two theoretical approaches.

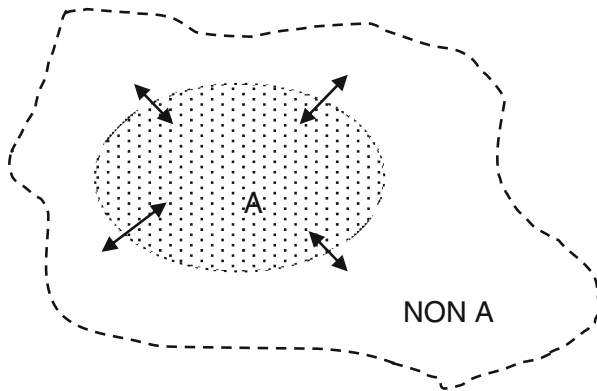
Second, we argue that religious meaning making perspective as well as the boundary perspective can help in overcoming essentialized ideas of 'cultural or religious difference' (critically among others R. D. Grillo 2003; Stolcke 1995; Dahinden 2011) by showing that it is not a natural, substantivist cultural difference with regard to religion which is the *raison d'être for the existence* of religious groups, but that subjective mobilisation of such ideas and symbols by actors – in terms of meaning making and boundaries – produce the groups in question. It is not the possession of so-called 'cultural characteristics' that makes social groups distinct – i.e. Christians from Jews or Muslims – but rather the social interactions with other groups that make the difference possible, salient, visible, socially meaningful and recognised or confirmed by others – in terms of content and meaning making and boundaries.

But in which sense are the two theoretical orientations complementary and what is the advantage of this complementarity? We believe that this double reading allows us to articulate analytical perspectives which are too often disjointed. On the one hand, issues of belonging and meaning are too often seen as reducible one to another. One extreme case of this reduction was formulated by Sartre (1948), when he considered that "it is the anti-Semite that makes the Jew": the belonging to a group was seen as only emerging in the intergroup dynamic, or in other words, would be the result of the boundary work linked to questions of power and dominance. Such analysis, relevant at one level, actually excludes the fact that from the "Jew's" perspective, there are certain meanings, tradition, values associated to the identity claim. Of course, it would be equally naïve to consider that Judaism is only its old tradition, out of the social and political history that deeply reshaped it over the millennium. Hence, combining an analysis of uses of religious stuff in terms of boundary making and meaning making is an invitation to consider sociocultural phenomena both in terms of boundaries and surface, envelops and contents. Like an organic cell, a religious group is both defined by its border and contact zone with other cells in an organism, and the processes that take place within that cell, and distinguish it from all the others (Fig. 1).

This necessary articulation between boundary and meaning can be grounded more theoretically. Classical social psychology has taught us that assigning a label (e.g. blue/green) or a meaning to a group (e.g. those who like the paintings of Monet vs. Kandinsky), thus distinguishing it from another one, inevitably creates feeling of self-definition, belonging and exclusion (Tajfel 1981a, b).

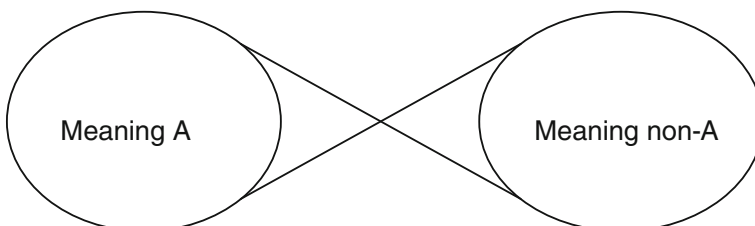
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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that they would not develop persistence – especially when there are institutionalised boundaries.



**Fig. 1** Mutual constitution of surface and boundary

Experimental studies have thus shown how elementary group assignment creates concurrence and possibly the escalation of intergroup hostility (Sherif et al. 1988): thus, group boundaries create differential meaning. In a more fundamental way, in more semiotic terms, any creation of a meaning A implies another, complementary non-A meaning (Josephs et al. 1999): it is impossible to create a meaning without actually creating the boundary between that meaning and what differs from it, and reversely (see Fig. 2). In that sense, meaning always generates boundaries. Of course, in complex, historically situated belonging and meanings, “non-As” can have an infinity of variations, and are temporal – which means that the tensions between A and non-A can be seen as dynamic movement between what is and what is not yet, what could be, what might not be (Valsiner 2007), and thus participate to the creations of new entities. Finally, studies on transitions in the lifecourse, which address more complex real-life situations, show that when people create new identities, they also always create new senses of situations, and new mode of acting; and that conversely, creating new meaning and interpretations also change actions, dynamics of recognition, and thus, identity work (Zittoun 2006b, 2012b). Altogether, the double analysis proposed here suggests that if religious stuff can be used in boundary work, it is also because it provides people and groups with tools not only to position themselves toward others, but also because it allows them to interpret their experiences, support their system of orientation – their position in time, the values that guide them - and thus guide their individual and collective actions, defines future orientation, and create new meanings and life forms.



**Fig. 2** Mutual constitution of intergroup boundaries and meaning

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