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Introduction: conventions and contentions

> The practice of studying only institutional documentation means that scholars miss all "lay" material, and helps explain why we still know so little about religious individualisation among non-institutionalised women and the common faithful. What is worse, it helps explain why we still fail to recognise the reciprocal influences of leading churchmen and spiritual women in developing lay devotion and lived spirituality in the later Middle Ages. It also helps us realise that searching for "institutionalisation" is only one aspect of our task, which has to be complemented by the search for "conventionalisation", that is to say the study of constant, formalised, and recognised conventions and practices that regulate and stabilise individual initiatives in societal forms.[1]

In her contribution to this publication, Anneke Mulder-Bakker points to a twofold ambivalence often encountered by scholars working on religious individualisation. Particularly in premodern scenarios, we are used to a focus on elite literature and therefore tend to overlook the impact of 'lay' material on processes of religious individualisation. At the same time, Mulder-Bakker's contribution shows that such 'lay' impulses rarely enter the history books: either because powerful elites or conventions prevent them from becoming institutionalised, i.e., from gathering stability over time by affecting larger groups of people; or, because they lose their individualising impetus over the course of their assimilation (and, eventually, expurgation) by established religious traditions or institutions.

How can processes of religious individualisation in all their multifacetedness gather stability over time and become relevant not just for a select few but for a significant number of people? Are there cultural strategies that help preserve those ideas, texts, practices, or sets of experiences for future generations that foster processes of religious individualisation, eventually eliciting the support, or even prompting the formation of, religious traditions or institutions proper? As indicated in the main introduction to this publication, these questions were among those focused upon during the second funding period of the research group 'religious individualisation in historical perspective', and they are also the main focus of this present part entitled 'Conventions and Contentions'. We used the term 'institutionalisation' for the perspective outlined above, and thereby wanted to move away from the analytical focus on individual actors in favour of broader social dynamics that indicate processes of enhanced dissemination (e.g., through group formation), stabilisation (e.g., through ritualisation), standardisation (e.g.,

1 Anneke Mulder-Bakker, 'Lived Religion and Eucharistic Piety on the Meuse and the Rhine in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', Section 3.1 of this publication.

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through the canonisation of texts), or even the establishment of 'regimes' of religious individualisation. To this end, we called for interpreting religious individualisation in context with, and in relation to, other religious strands as well as non-religious social spheres, including processes of, or eventual relapses into, de- or non-individualisation.

In hindsight, this appears to be quite an ambitious project and the final outcome presented in this part is more ambiguous than we had anticipated. This discrepancy may be due to three particular issues: (1) religious individualisation is itself a multifaceted phenomenon, or even refers to a range of different phenomena subsumed under the same umbrella (justifiably or not: see Otto 2017), so that one wonders to which of these various processes the term 'institutionalisation' might actually refer; (2) the composite 'institutionalising religious individualisation' was hence either too narrow, ambivalent, abstract, or complex to plausibly be localised in the data of most scholars who partook in our project; (3) the idea itself seems to entail some unresolved tensions, or ambivalences, that are difficult to conceptualise, let alone identify in historical scenarios. These ambivalences mostly pertain to the observation that, as soon as religious individualisation affects religious groups or prompts their formation, dynamics of normativisation or standardisation may undermine its initial impetus and instead lead to compulsory, normative or other forms of pseudo- or counter-individualistic group dynamics. Yet such relapses may not be inevitable and the task was, therefore, to find those subtle in-between-cases in which dynamics of religious individualisation had become relevant for larger groups (i.e., not only for some outstanding individuals) and gathered some stability over time while dynamics of homogenisation, dogmatisation, or the suppression of individual deviations had not (yet) led to backlashes into de- or non-individualisation.

Due to these conceptual difficulties and ambivalences, 'institutionalisation' did not make it into the title of this part of the publication, and the term also figures only occasionally in the contributions assembled here. Yet the idea that processes of religious individualisation can gather stability over time and inform religious groups or foster their foundation remains in the background, so that it is necessary to – briefly – explain what we had in mind by making use of the term 'institutionalisation'. Obviously, our understanding differs from standard theories in economics, social sciences, or law, according to which different types of institutions are distinguished (formal and informal: North 1990) and institutions are demarcated from conventions and other social norms. If one differentiates formal and informal institutions, the former usually provide a set of (predetermined and textualised, e.g., legislative) rules that are enforced by a third party – usually the state –, thus shaping, stabilising, and governing human behaviour. In contrast,

informal institutions may relate to customary law, may not be textualised, and may only be enforced by social sanctions (e.g., through forms of ostracism or 'othering'). Formal institutions very much represent collective rationality and are thus to be demarcated from informal institutions, which may only reflect the preconceptions and worldviews of particular (but eventually powerful) groups. Consider, for instance, the formal institution of marriage and – now in parts of the world – same-sex marriages, and on-going reservations and objections in the respective populations against the latter – which would then represent an informal institution. In contrast, certain types of fashion may be generally accepted and/or unquestioned and thus be considered neither formal nor informal institutions but, rather, mere conventions.

With this in mind, our idea of 'institutionalising religious individualisation' did not, of course, envisage the formation of fully-fledged 'institutions' of religious individualisation. These would be analogous to, say, law in modern nation states or, in the realm of religion, the foundation of a church – which today often functions both as an organisation as well as a formal institution that is granted certain rights by society at large. We wanted to analyse socio-historical processes and group dynamics that, on a somewhat smaller scale, trigger the enhancement of religious self-determination, the pluralisation of religious options, the facilitation of religious deviance, the development of elaborated notions of the self, or the realisation of intense 'experiences deemed religious' (Taves 2009) within religious groups or a larger number of religious actors over longer periods of time and in different historical scenarios. Quoting from our initial call for papers, we invited contributors to look at the following processes: '(i) the dissemination of certain patterns of self-practices (bodily, emotionally, spiritually); (ii) the ritualization of certain modes or patterns of communication of an individual actor or person with other persons or actors, including especially the not immediately plausible one(s); (iii) the emergence of spaces of choice or freedom (in various meanings of the term) of the individual vis-à-vis the wider group or category of reference; (iv) the creation of forms of sociality, community or collectivity that provide relatively unconstrained social (including religious) spaces for enabling the development of one's personal options or paths'.

Over the course of preparing the contributions and editing this part of the publication, and due to the ambiguities in the notions of 'institution' and 'institutionalisation', we – that is, the contributors and editors –, felt the need for a change of vocabulary, from which the title 'conventions and contentions' emerged. What do we mean by this formulation? To begin with, institution/alisation, at least in its economic or legislative sense, necessitates the capacity to sanction deviant (religious) thought or behaviour, and thus seemed too broad. At the same time

it was also too specific to deal with a multitude of the more nuanced settings that we tend to find in historical cases. In fact, 'conventions and contentions' rather points to an on-going interplay between established dynamics of power, cultural norms of behaviour, patterns of belief and other societal structures at large – 'conventions' –, and the human tendency to question and deviate from such structures, independent of whether this is an un- or self-conscious act, whether it is performed individually or socially, or whether it involves secrecy or publicity. This is not to say that 'conventions' inevitably lead to deviations and, as it were, 'contentions', but we do assume that those historical scenarios that point to dynamics of an enhanced dissemination, stabilisation, or standardisation of religious individualisation are often influenced by the aforementioned interplay. The goal of this part of the publication was, therefore, to identify the dynamics of the stabilisation of religious individualisation from a 'grass-roots' perspective and with a particular focus on group formation in all its fragility, controversiality, and mutability.

With all this in mind, the rationale for the present part of the publication was to explore the dynamic interplay between 'conventions and contentions' and the impact of this interplay on the institutionalisation of religious individualisation. To that end, we assembled and compared case studies that cover different religious environments and historical scenarios, focusing on South Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe from antiquity to the recent past. For analytical reasons, we decided to divide these case studies into two groups: the first group focuses on 'practices' and the second on 'texts and narratives'. While the contributions to the first section thus ponder the impact of practices – ritual is foremost but contributors also consider economic or bureaucratic practices – on processes of religious individualisation and their eventual institutionalisation, the second section focuses on the impact of texts, narratives, and the relevance of the author and readership to such processes.

In both sections, our case studies reveal that detecting and analysing forms of institutionalisation of religious individualisation is a complicated task. The case studies in section one indicate that practices, foremost ritual practices, have a two-fold, or ambivalent, quality when it comes to religious individualisation: they may enhance individual agency, provide new options of behaviour, facilitate critical or deviant thought, or yield extraordinary experiences. However, they may also take on a shared, stereotypical, or even normative character, thus making it hard to consistently confirm a causal relationship between ritualisation and religious individualisation. Section two shows that the written word lends itself more readily to conventionalisation, and possibly, institutionalisation. Literary and religious texts have often set in motion particular discourses that empower and promote religious individualisation, particularly with regard to ideas of

personhood and individuality. It is, however, the 'modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation' (Foucault 1977, 137) that provide insights into the cultures and social relations that embolden paths of religious individualisation. In other words, it is the production and modification of the 'author function' that indicates the emergence of institutions, these in turn valorise the exemplary 'individual/author'. The figures discussed in the 'texts and narratives' section are the 'founders of discursivity', the prime movers of particular currents of thought, although subsequent texts and writers gave retroactive force to these founders, since these latter contributors were the critical perpetrators of the discourse in which they took part.

Let us briefly summarise the contributions to both sections. Section one, on 'practices', traces the institutionalisation of religious individualisation with a focus on practices, particularly ritual practices (Patera, Ramelli, Mulder-Bakker), but also economic (Hermann-Pillath) and legislative (Nijhawan) practices. *Ioanna Pateria*, in a paper entitled 'Individuals in the Eleusinian Mysteries: Choices and actions' ponders the 'individualistic' elements in this ancient Greek ritual, an endeavour which turns out to be difficult, due to the public and normative nature and context of the ritual. In a similar vein, *Ilaria Ramelli*, in her article 'Institutionalisation of Religious Individualisation: Asceticism in Antiquity and Late Antiquity and the Rejection of Slavery and Social Injustice', describes patterns of religious individualisation in ancient monasticism and the surrounding debates on slavery. She, too, arrives at an ambivalent result, as dynamics of de-traditionalisation, an enhanced focus on individual salvation, or preliminary ideas of human rights and 'dignity', are accompanied by various de- or counter-individualising dynamics, such as binding monastic rules, ritual standardisation, or the recurrent desire for tradition(alisation) in ancient ascetic milieus. *Anneke Mulder-Bakker*, in her piece 'Lived Religion and Eucharistic Piety at the Meuse and the Rhine in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', outlines processes of religious individualisation in some exemplary lay religious women in late medieval Europe. As these women failed in prompting greater dynamics of religious individualisation, but nonetheless became exemplary figures in later hagiographies, Mulder-Bakker speaks of 'conventionalisation' (understood as the formation of 'stable, formalised and recognised conventions and practices, which regulate and stabilise individual initiatives in societal forms') rather than 'institutionalisation'.

Carsten Herrmann-Pillath's chapter 'Religious Individualisation in China: A Two-Modal Approach' outlines a fully-fledged economic theory of religious individualisation based on the religious market model (RMM). Choosing modern China as his example, Hermann-Pillath distinguishes two basic modes of economic exchange – market exchange and gift exchange – and explains

the institutionalisation of religious individualisation as well as backlashes into de- or non-individualisation as a dynamic interplay between these two exchange modes. *Michael Nijhawan*, in his paper 'Migrant Precarity and religious individualisation', shifts our attention to legal – or bureaucratic – practices, namely those geared towards controlling the residence, activities, and eventual deportation of Sikhs seeking asylum in post-1984 Germany. He shows how Kafkaesque bureaucratic necessities and procedures – such as the asylee's frequent dependence on court orders, work permits, or monthly visa-renewals – lead to a variety of changes in their religious practices and self-perceptions that correlate to processes of religious individualisation. These include certain forms of de-traditionalisation, creative re-interpretations of Sikh terminologies, or enhanced reflections on their religious self or self-hood. Finally, *Bernd-Christian Otto*'s piece 'The Illuminates of Thanateros and the Institutionalisation of Religious Individualisation' analyses the schism of a contemporary grouping of 'learned magic' (or 'magick', as it is called in modern practitioner literature). According to Otto, this schism illustrates the tension between a strikingly individualist, anti-hierarchical, anti-dogmatic agenda on the one hand and competing (group) dynamics of dogmatisation, authoritarianism, secrecy, and power abuse on the other, thus, again, pointing to basic ambivalences in the idea of institutionalising religious individualisation.

Section two analyses the institutionalisation of religious individualisation with a specific focus on 'texts and narratives'. The section is organised around the nexus of authorship, texts, audience, and the locations of individualisation and institutionalisation. *Ian Henderson*'s reading of Chapter 7 of Paul's Letter to the Romans, '"...quod nolo, illud facio" (Romans 7:20): Institutionalising the unstable self', reveals how Romans 7 has provoked particularly individualising reading traditions and reflections on the 'I' and the complexity of the Self. This text inspired and intensified conflicting discourses about personhood and individuality between Torah and Gospel. Paul conjured up the confusing 'I' of Romans 7 to haunt and destabilise the subsequent institutionalisation of Christianity. The many Pauls of this text ask the audience to question the nature and stability of the identity, self, and the 'I' in the text. *Anne Feldhaus*' piece, 'Individualisation, Deindividualisation, and Institutionalisation among the Early Mahānubhāvs', discusses the Old Marathi literature of the 13th-century Mahānubhāvs as both a classic example of individualisation and its mitigation – revealing the tensions and contradictions in the processes of religious individualisations that emerge from textual sources. Her chapter examines the characterisation of two of the divine incarnations, Cakradhar and Guṇḍam Rāüḷ, in their Mahānubhāv hagiographies, and the account of the early years the disciples spent without the benefit of the incarnations' presence, therefore attempting to maintain the divine

presence in narrative form (14th–15th centuries). In her contribution, 'Religious Individualisation and Collective Bhakti: Sarala Dasa and Bhima Bhoi', *Ishita Banerjee-Dube*, also dealing with an early Indian text, examines the *Mahabharata* in Odia ascribed to Sarala Dasa, the *adi kavi*, the originary (but not necessarily the first) poet of vernacular Odia. She discusses Bhima Bhoi's compositions and those attributed to him in order to trace the constitution and mobility of texts and author(s) in the very process of their actualisation in interpretive reading. Banerjee-Dube illustrates the force the audience and readership have on the text and, indeed, the ability to produce the figure of the author according to the needs of the recipients of texts. Moving to North India, *Rahul Bjørn Parson*'s chapter, 'Individualisation and Democratisation of Knowledge in Banārasīdās' *Samayasāra Nāṭaka*', engages with the 17th-century Jain poet Banārasīdās in order to trace how the poet mobilises and transforms older Jain philosophical concepts of non-absolutism and may-be-ness for a new historical moment, one in which a growing interest in personhood and Self starts to inform a particular species of religious individualisation. Banārasīdās gives force to an idea of the Self in neutrality, resisting partiality, influence and dogmatism, in order to *experience* (*anubhav*) the true Self. Additionally, since the subsequent poets conform to the conventions of the genre of *Adhyātmik* (spiritual) poetry popularised by Banārasīdās, this study also serves as an example of how pathways of individualisation oscillate between innovation and conventionalisation.

In his contribution, 'Subjects of Conversion in Colonial Central India', *Saurabh Dube* explores the interplay of conversion, translation, and the life-stories of central Indian converts to Christianity in 19th and 20th-century India. Focusing on autobiographies and biographies of converts in the Chhattisgarh region of central India, Dube shows how the sources reveal an ambivalence towards and resistance against patriarchal power, the search for a local meaning and vocation, as well as a drive to vernacularise and localise Christian revelation, namely, to personalise and individualise the Word in the Indian context. *Max Deeg*'s chapter, entitled 'Many Biographies – Multiple Individualities: The Identities of the Chinese Buddhist Monk Xuanzang', discusses the East Asian Yogācāra master *par exemplum* and Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (600/602–664), in order to explore the ways in which individualisation has manifested in several historical narratives about one specific individual. Xuanzang's biographies have been received, projected, and recreated repeatedly, from the time of the monk up to present-day film adaptations. Xuanzang's different biographies reflect a rare historical process during which many identities are constructed and multiple individualities are implied. Finally, in 'Jewish emancipation, religious individualisation, and metropolitan integration: A case study on Moses Mendelssohn and Moritz Lazarus', *Sabine Sander* closes this section of the publication with a discussion

of the path taken 'out of the Ghetto' by European Jews between 1750 and 1850. She examines the parallel biographies as well as the religious and linguistic writings of two German-Jewish scholars, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) and Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903). Sander shows how the writings of Mendelsohn and Lazarus, as well as their life stories, both initiated and institutionalised processes of individualisation, as well as the subsequent expression of these developments within the Jewish religion. Religious individualisation, particularly as manifested in texts, offered emancipation and self-development for European Jews, while at the same time informing European urban demographics and metropolitan growth.

The two sections of this publication, 'Practices' and 'Texts and Narratives', thus form a productive alliance. The 'practices' section reminds us of the blurred relationship between textual ideas, topoi and tropes, and the reality of praxis. It fleshes out the ineffability and some of the ambiguities inherent in processes of religious individualisation but it also points to certain requirements of institutionalisation processes: without ritualisation, group formation, or the establishment of textual traditions, religious individualisation may remain nothing but a niche phenomenon. The 'texts and narratives' section reveals some of the limitations of language, at the point of the ineffable, as well as the (in)stability of the concept of the author. Here, unsurprisingly, the examples frequently deal with irony, *akrasia*, paradox, and contradiction. We see how texts are instructive in fathoming the limits of language, particularly with regard to the ineffability of the Self and the individual, especially when attempting to express this in a shared, universal code such as language. Against this backdrop, practices and rituals give us a glimpse of what may manifest in performance, action, resistance, or praxis, rather than mere words. The ambiguous results of the 'practices' section offer a sobering rejoinder to the 'texts and narratives' section, which trades in the more idealised realm of promise and possibility.

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