

Foreword to the Series

Religious-ideological diversity with its ambivalent – destructive as well as enriching – elements is more than ever part of the everyday experience of most contemporary societies. This is especially the case as a result of globalization, migration, and the forced flight of millions of people from different cultural contexts due to political crises and conflicts. Interreligious encounters, communication, and positioning are therefore not a mere option but rather an expression of a “dialogical imperative” (Christoph Schwöbel), on which the peaceful coexistence of religious communities in the respective societies or of entire neighboring cultures depends. The social, political, and cultural dynamics and explosiveness of this phenomenon can hardly be overestimated and are often accompanied by fears, prejudices, and conflicts. They explain why current research is intensively concerned with the challenges of multi-religious constellations. Several questions come to mind/: How can we deal with the inescapable fact of the plurality of conflicting claims to meaning and truth, which, in conjunction with social and political upheavals, can often constitute a potentially explosive mixture? What are the causes of religious conflicts, fundamentalisms, and violence? In contrast, how viable are concepts such as multiculturalism, interreligiousness, or interculturality which, with different emphases, take a critical stance towards forms of religious exclusivity, aggression, or the uniformity of religious or religious-national *Leitkulturen*, or “dominant cultures”?

This book series assembles research results of an interdisciplinary and interreligious cooperative project of the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and the Justus Liebig University Giessen, which has been funded by the Hessian Ministry of Science and Art in recent years. Under the title “Religious Positioning: Modalities and Constellations in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Contexts,” scholars in the fields of religious studies, Christian theology, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, ethnology, sociology, and pedagogy dealt with the phenomena of religious diversity and difference. These were analyzed as basic categories of interreligious and intercultural encounters from a historical-systematic and empirical-systematic perspective – with a focus on the three monotheistic religions. Strong attention was placed on the theoretically as well as socio-politically relevant core question regarding the possibilities, conditions, and limits of a qualified religious pluralism, i.e., a constructive, respectful handling of religious plurality and difference.

In contrast to concepts of interreligious dialogue which aim at a consensus-oriented, relativizing approach that aims to downplay the element of difference, the work of this research project is based on the premise that the existence of the Other or the Foreign in religiously diverse constellations necessitates *positioning* in the sense of a representation and affirmation of what is one’s own. This encoun-

ter and confrontation with different beliefs and claims to validity is constitutive for every interreligious contact and can initially be grasped with the category of *diversity*. Diversity as a perception of difference and otherness, or alterity, can be interpreted as enriching plurality. However, it is also often perceived as an irritating difference, incompatible with or even threatening to our own self-image. The respective experience and interpretation of diversity and difference can result in quite different options for dealing with it: the leveling relativization of one's own and others' claims to truth, the argumentative advocacy of one's own position, the pragmatic toleration of the existence of the Other, religious apologetics, polemics, and discrimination, all the way to the missionary subjugation of the difference or its violent suppression. Of course, forms of dialogical rapprochement are also possible, provided that the perception of positions contradicting one's own becomes the basis for mutual acknowledgement. In view of these possible alternative implications of experienced diversity, the question arises as to what potential but also what resistance Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as well as other religious traditions) harbor with respect to a constructive-dialogical approach to religious and/or ideological difference. This question refers both to diversity and difference within the respective religion, and to the encounter between competing religious and non-religious worldviews.

Whether religious positionings have a more destructive, integrative, or dialogical character obviously does not depend primarily on the content of the respective position held. Rather, the historical, political, and cultural constellations in which they take place, as well as on the modalities under which they are introduced into social discourses play a significant role. Thus, even beliefs conscious of differences can be capable of pluralism if they are committed to principles of epistemic humility and are able to recognize the legitimacy, dignity, and validity of other traditions when positioning themselves vis-à-vis them. The concept of the capability to deal with plurality in processes of religious positioning does not so much describe the ability to take a stand beyond one's own beliefs and values but rather a conscious affirmation of the right of the Other to recognition and an understanding of one's own position in the sense of a critically reflexive positionality in public discourse. One of the potential constructive modalities which were taken into consideration in the research network, can be grasped with the concept of *dialogism*, following the theories of linguistics and literary studies – especially in the work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin. This concept seems particularly suited to describe how argumentative positions, characterized by diversity and difference, can also be given voice as such, without the intention of reconciling them. As a theoretical approach that examines the philosophical, communication-theoretical, and historical-social as well as political conditions and implications of dialogical practice from a descriptive and normative perspective, it points to the possibility of a dialogical

rather than confrontational understanding of positioning. It programmatically presumes the legitimacy of a polyphony of plurality and difference that may remain irrevocable even in dialogical constellations. On this basis, a communicative practice could be substantiated that facilitates an affirmation of one's own point of view without a monological claim to absoluteness, i.e., the readiness to clearly express one's own position and to do so without overwhelming one's interlocutors or refusing to acknowledge their position.

However, the monographs and edited volumes resulting from the collaboration within the research hub do not intend to promote a uniform normative model of dealing with religious diversity or addressing a restricted spectrum of questions. Rather, they represent the polyphony of interdisciplinary discussions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and interpretations of religious, cultural, or political positioning in history and the present. The essays in this volume explore processes of positioning as reflected in the interpretation of crisis phenomena in modern and contemporary Jewish thought and contemplate the significance of the multi-layered historical findings for the self-understanding and responsibility of the discipline of 'Modern Jewish Thought' in the context of burning contemporary debates. Based on differentiated definitions of the concept of *crisis* and an understanding of modernity as a period of multiple crises, the authors investigate, among other things, the interrelations between modernity, crisis, and Jewish historical experiences in the face of emancipation, acculturation, and contemporary historical upheavals such as wars, persecutions, and an unprecedented genocide. The underlying thesis that the diasporic and exilic existence of the Jewish people constantly challenged Jewish intellectuals of the modern age to find answers to such experiences of crisis by drawing on Jewish religious and cultural traditions is developed in a perspective-rich manner as a compulsion to position themselves: What was required were responses to heretical religious concepts, to apocalyptic hopes and fears, to political and cultural upheavals, to the consequences of mass migration as well as to historical catastrophes and experiences of extreme violence. Positioning regarding inter- and multi-religious constellations, processes of secularization or the questioning of concepts of exile by modern Jewish nationalism and Zionism are of equally central importance. Finally, the volume also deals with the question of whether and how contemporary modern Jewish thought – beyond the historical reconstruction of positions of Jewish intellectuals in Europe, Israel and the USA – should and can position itself in the view of the crisis experiences of our time.

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