

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 encounter 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 the experience of 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 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 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 plu-

rality 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 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 rich essays assembled in this volume explore processes of positioning as reflected in interpretations of the *Aqedah*, the famous, challenging, and controversial narrative of the binding of Isaac/Ishmael by Abraham in Genesis 22, across the divides of the three Abrahamic religions. Written by an international, interdisciplinary, and interreligious group of scholars that represents different areas of research such as the history of Christianity, biblical theology, systematical theology, philosophy of religion, the history of science, Jewish studies, and Islamic studies, these articles focus on exegetical, hermeneutical, theological, philosophical and ethical questions raised by this story that has captivated the minds and imagination of Jewish, Christian, Muslim readers from antiquity to the present as well as modern and contemporary philosophers and literary authors. In this felicitous constellation of interpretative voices emerging from a longstanding academic dialogue on the relationship and tension between the autonomy of human reason and the heteronomy of revealed religion as reflected in the history of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought, several distinctive elements of religious positioning can be discovered.

First, as is well-known, all three religions have appropriated the narrative of the "sacrifice" or "binding" of Isaac/Ishmael to express their respective religious self-understanding, their interpretation of the nature of faith and obedience, their views on rationality and morality, and they have, by doing so, also always reflected upon the differences between their religious identities. Second, all three traditions have felt challenged to develop a polyphony of different exegetical, hermeneutical, and philosophical strategies to position themselves towards and confront the challenges posed and the irritations caused by Genesis 22. The theological and ethical responses Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers have found cannot simply be categorized along the lines of the religious divide between their respective traditions but often transcend the boundaries and demonstrate that the intellectual and spiritual relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in the past as well as in the present, is characterized by both profound differences and equally important phenomena of entanglement. All three of them constantly had the other

two on their minds. All the more, the contributions to this volume clearly show that what is needed today, in the context of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue, is a reading of the story of the *Aqedah* and its multifaceted reception history that creates a critical and constructive conversation between the Abrahamic religions, a reading that involves comparative perspectives (also with regard to other, non-Abrahamic religions), pays attention to characteristic differences and yet is keenly aware of the fact that all of them are confronted by the same challenging elements of this enigmatic biblical story. And this is where another—third—process of positioning comes into play in these essays: the way modern philosophical or literary readings, be they religiously inspired or of a secular nature, refer to traditional religious interpretations of the *Aqedah*, or the way current theological or religious philosophical readings enter a conversation with motifs found in modern and contemporary philosophy and literature. What is obvious is that the confrontation with the fascinating, troubling story of Genesis 22 continues to provoke thought, discussion, controversy, and dialogue.

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