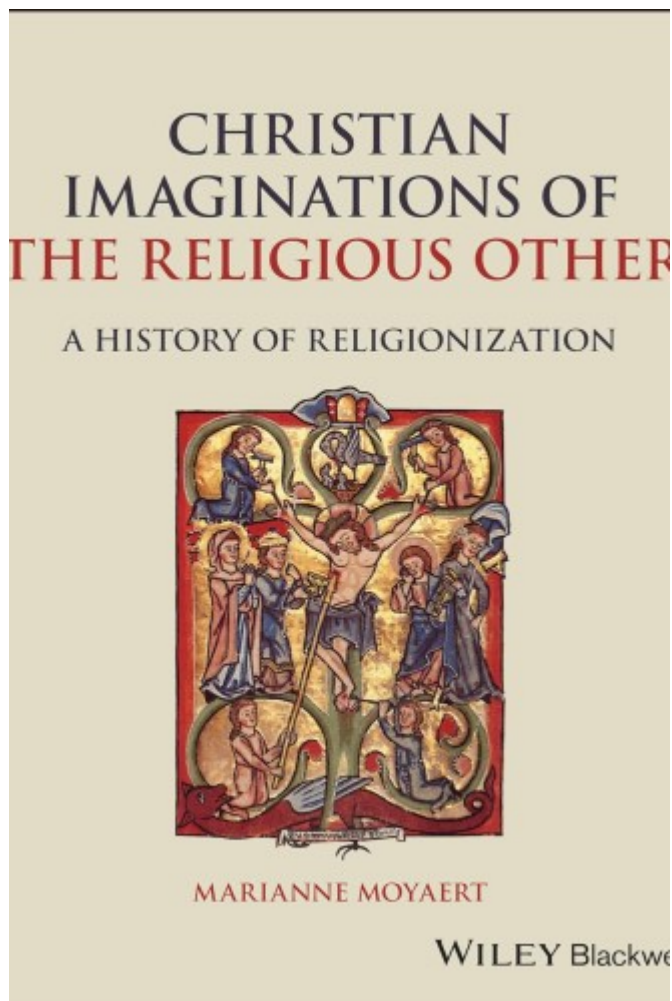


The legacy of “religionization”

Marianne Moyaert provides a helpful but somber history of the ways European Christians have imagined people of other faiths.

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [March 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other

A History of Religionization

By Marianne Moyaert

Wiley Blackwell

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In recent decades many scholars have critiqued the long, tragic history of Christian prejudices and actions against other religious traditions. From the time of the early church, some followers of Jesus interpreted biblical texts in a manner hostile to the Jewish people, setting a model for conflicted interactions with other religious traditions throughout the centuries. Many observers have noted the difficult history of the term *religion*. Daniel Boyarin and Carlin Barton have banished the word from their English translations of ancient texts, and in his study of the Pueblo nation in the southwestern United States, archaeologist Severin Fowles concludes that *religion* is so problematic that it cannot be refashioned and salvaged; he proposes the term *doings* as a substitute. Other scholars, like historian Robert Orsi, have professed disgust not only with Catholicism but with all religions because of the evil they have done.

Marianne Moyaert, a theologian at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, has a distinguished record of scholarship on the Catholic Church's rejection of antisemitism and the role of ritual in interreligious relations and comparative theology. In *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*, Moyaert offers a detailed history of the harmful effects of "religionization," which she defines as "the process of selfing and othering predicated on religious difference." Even though she defines religionization in terms of religious difference, she acknowledges that defining the term *religion* is problematic and is intimately intertwined with another contested term, *race*, in a process that she calls "religio-racialization." She proposes that religionization, like racialization, "categorizes, essentializes, ranks, and governs people based on imaginary differences." Her discussion could be understood as offering support for those who wish to banish the word *religion* and the social processes of identity formation the term represents.

Moyaert explicitly limits her discussion to European Christians, thereby disregarding the history of Asian and African Christian imaginations of the religious other, like the Church of the East's evocative use of Buddhist and Daoist images in Tang dynasty China. In practice, Moyaert restricts herself even further to Roman Catholic and Protestant imaginations of the religious other, thereby continuing a long history of Catholic and Protestant neglect of the history and theology of Eastern Christians

after the time of the early church.

Working on a broad scale, Moyaert offers a very helpful overview of a wide range of scholarship. She reviews various meanings of religion from the ancient world to modernity, noting how Christian imaginations of religious others repeatedly changed in relation to political and social situations. Her examples of how historic Christians have imagined relations with other religious practitioners, however, are overwhelmingly negative ones. She does not include Ramon Llull's proposal for a respectful dialogue between a gentile, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, or the call of Nicholas of Cusa and Juan de Segovia for *contraferentia*, a form of interreligious dialogue during the 1450s, or Matteo Ricci's expressions of friendship with Confucian leaders.

Moyaert criticizes the Parliament of the World's Religions of 1893 for allegedly imposing White liberal Protestant assumptions on the encounter, marginalizing ritual and dogma, and continuing the process of modern secularized religio-racialization. At the parliament, she writes, "true Christianness is projected as meek and humble, a-dogmatic, de-ritualized, and a-political." Yet she fails to acknowledge that the Catholic archbishops in attendance did not see themselves or the parliament as abandoning dogma or ritual. At one point, Catholic archbishop John Ireland and bishop John Keane could not make their way through the crowds to the general assembly, so they made a detour to the Jewish assembly, where they were warmly welcomed and invited to preside. Neither the Catholic nor the Jewish leaders that day understood themselves to be abandoning their faith commitment or ritual practices, but they realized a form of peace and fellowship that was a harbinger of future developments. Moyaert discusses the parliament only as a historic event, without mentioning the repeated convenings of the parliament around the world since the centennial gathering in 1993, which have regularly involved a wide array of traditions, including Indigenous communities.

Moyaert's wide-ranging historical survey synthesizes much recent scholarship. Overall, her discussion is helpful, informative, and reliable. However, there are some puzzling errors and omissions. She misidentifies the pontiff who issued the Roman Missal of the Tridentine Rite in 1570, and she fails to note that the lectionary of this rite included almost no texts from the First Testament of the Bible, thereby contributing to a separation of Jesus from Jews and Judaism in the popular Catholic imagination that lasted into the 20th century. She also claims that Catholics were not allowed to employ historical criticism of the Bible until the Second Vatican

Council, although in 1943 Pope Pius XII approved and encouraged Catholic historical critical studies of the Bible in his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*. The emerging Catholic biblical scholars of the 1950s and early 1960s learned much from Jewish and Protestant scholarship and played a significant role at the Second Vatican Council.

Throughout her discussion, Moyaert rightly attends to the importance of ritual but says far less about the decisive role of interpretation of scripture in shaping Christian imaginations of the religious other. She criticizes claims that Catholic leaders began to revise their assessment of Jews and Judaism soon after World War II—though she fails to mention the 1947 meeting in Seelisberg, Switzerland, where Catholic leaders, including representatives of the German bishops' conference and the future Swiss cardinal Charles Journet, together with Protestants and Jews, called for major transformation of Christian imaginations of Jews, including recognition of Jesus as a Jew and new ways of interpreting the Bible. In 2009, the International Council of Christians and Jews issued a statement, "A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians," which commemorates the ten points of Seelisberg and issues a renewed call to reshape the Christian imagination with regard to the Jewish people with particular attention to biblical interpretation.

Despite her attention to ritual, Moyaert does not emphasize what was arguably the most important change in the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist after the Second Vatican Council with regard to imagining the religious other: the inclusion in the revised lectionary of a much wider selection of texts from the First Testament. After centuries of neglect of the Jewish scriptures, Catholics began to hear them on a regular basis and learned to situate Jesus in his Jewish heritage. One of the most important transformations of Christian imaginations regarding religious others in the last 80 years has come from the close collaboration of Jewish and Christian scholars who read the New Testament texts as reflecting a period before the two traditions parted ways.

Moyaert critiques the binary distinction between "good" religion and "bad" religion, but running through her discussion is an implicit binary distinction between "bad" religionization, which dominates the history of Christian imaginations of the religious other up to the present, and a hoped-for "good" Christian imagination of the religious other. She doesn't spell out the latter in any detail, so it remains a very frail hope. Efforts to reform and improve the Christian imagination with regard to other traditions, Moyaert claims, have thus far continued to religionize and racialize in

ever new ways. While she hopes for better Christian imaginations of religious others, she does not offer concrete, constructive proposals for how to use the term *religion* positively or overcome religionization. This volume offers a powerful critique that ends on a very somber note.

From the tragedy of religio-racialization in North America, there emerged beautiful songs of both suffering and hope in the African American spirituals. Informed by the theology expressed in these sorrow songs, Howard Thurman led an African American delegation to India, where he met with Mahatma Gandhi, who provided inspiration to the African American leaders. What resulted was one of the most consequential transformations of the Christian imagination regarding the religious other in all of history, as African Americans received inspiration from a Hindu on how to implement the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In Moyaert's recounting of religio-racialization in European Christian imaginations, there is no comparable moment of hope. One may hope that the cross-fertilization of the European church with the world church may yet stimulate a new chapter in the Christian imagination.