Introduction

B O R D E R I N G

Weighty Questions Ignored

Religious turmoil is part and parcel of our days. Samuel P. Huntington[1] suggested that religion would be the main impetus for the clash of civilizations in the twenty-first century. He lived to see airplanes hijacked and flown into skyscrapers. Religious terrorism has become a major political issue globally. Based on religious motives, believers of one religion kill those of another religion. In some regions they thus continue with what their ancestors have been doing on and off for centuries. In other cases believers' violence is new, directed against modernization and the unprecedented radical transformation of global society, yet using ultra-modern means. All these examples are extreme illustrations of the influence of "bordering" religions, their dualistic worldview, and the human cost of that worldview.

Some clarification of definitions is needed. "Bordering"[2] can be defined as *the tendency to treat the results of a group's or a category's meaning-making activities as exclusive and self-evident*. Bordering worldviews stimulate this tendency. The bordering process comprises all that is done to establish and maintain the exclusivity and self-sufficiency of a group's meaning-making. Borders are the social constructs that result from the bordering process. Bordering is not a static, but rather a dynamic process, subject to articulation and criticism. The term worldview refers to religions, but also to secular life philosophies such as ideologies, humanism, and atheism.

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1. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*.
2. Hereafter without inverted commas.

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I use the term "meaning-making" in a broad sense, referring to the application of the human ability to attach meaning to reality, labeling and interpreting any object, being, act, emotion, experience, person, or relationship, submitting the result itself to new meaning-making, thus combining continuity and change. Meaning-making is sense-making with all the abilities that the human animal has at her or his disposition. Culture and also religion are among the results of collective meaning-making activity. Meaning-making is not just a purely rational, cerebral activity, but may involve emotions and bodily reactions. For example, during the first twenty minutes after waking, I am busy meaning-making, trying to make sense of my strange dream, registering that I feel hungry, deciding what to wear today and why, and responding to my wife's observations. Over breakfast the radio news is aired, the morning newspaper sits on the table, and the world comes crashing in, bombarding us with challenges for new meaning-making. The rest of the day is no different.

There is more to say about the bordering of religions. In their exclusive meaning-making, borders seal "us" off from "them," "insiders" from "outsiders." They separate believers of other faiths from unbelievers. Believers on one side of a border ritually ignore pertinent questions and issues raised by "them." One would think that some arguments and experiences could not be overlooked, and yet in the case of bordering religions they are ignored without a second thought. Believers pay little heed to criticism or challenges from beyond the border. Although in our own era, according to Charles Taylor, religion has become "one human possibility among others,"[3] bordering religions cherish their self-limited claims. Alternative views are ignored, even today, with the unmistakable global presence of religious pluralism. Not even the problem of the unhappy coexistence of religions is able to change this perspective. In fact, the attitudes created at the border may nourish confrontation. In instances where the process of establishing borders leads to splendid isolation, virtually none of the people standing at the border are aware of the censorship that contains them. Not even their leaders, their gatekeepers, seem to be familiar with this mechanism. The question then is how this autocratic process of self-containment comes about and is able to survive in a cultural context that increasingly denies its existence.

The most obvious example of the borders of religion is of course fundamentalism. The term stems from the twelve-volume *Fundamentals*

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3. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

published in early twentieth century US Protestantism, but nowadays the phenomenon is recognized in non-Christian religions as well. Fundamentalism has been defined as "a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society perceived to have strayed from its cultural moorings."[4] In our era, criticisms of the process of modernization (through which science and technology have become important influences in the design of society, culture, worldview, and morals) have become crucial characteristics of fundamentalism.

Yet, the spirit of imagining borders into existence is not limited to fundamentalist religions or to scenarios with human costs. Bordering is an inevitable ingredient of social life. Even tolerant believers employ the "us vs. them" binary schema, sticking by routine or conviction to exclude other views and attitudes. The average believer would never consider moving into another religious group. Any group, whether religious or not, sustains a kind of border control. The sheer existence of a multitude of different groups, even within one tradition, testifies to the importance of religious incompatibility, just as it points to the abundant effects of creativity and imagination. Believers develop their worldview within the spectrum of "us" and "them," with all the possible positions between the extremes, which either polarize, or on the contrary, explore forms of blurring. Inter-religious dialogue proves to be a fraught enterprise, with even conciliatory believers experiencing great difficulty in establishing common ground.[5] In the bordering process, power is a decisive factor, simply because power influences and controls behavior. Though the degree and nature of their power varies, all religious groups, in maintaining their own position, tend to act as powerful religions.

To explore the characteristics of the phenomenon of creating borders and to comprehend the mechanisms behind it, I will start by giving four examples of repressed questions and issues. They include *diversity, the God Debate, power mechanisms,* and *global problems*. Together these show that bordering comes with considerable human cost, both for the believer who builds borders, and for those outside his or her religion. I return to the same examples frequently throughout the course of this book, most explicitly in chapter six. They will help us to reach a better understanding of the bordering process and the *cordon sanitaire* erected around these questions. The discussion of these questions and issues will illustrate that bordering

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4. Shupe, "Religious Fundamentalism," 481. Italics in the original.

5. Reedijk, *Roots and Routes*.

is not the privilege of fundamentalist religion. I thus seek to find a modus beyond the bordering position. Moreover, I wish to redirect us from the path of powerful to playful religion.

Four Examples

My first example, already touched on, but frequently overlooked, pertains to the *diversity* of religious views that, more than ever before, are visible in the modern world. The mass media now serve as the religions' display window. One would expect that this would cause believers of exclusive religions to worry about the truth of their own beliefs. Unavoidable questions may come to the surface. Should all religions other than my own be considered wrong? Why do other people perceive other things to exist between heaven and earth? Is salvation the exclusive property of my religion? To these and other pertinent and topical questions, "bordered" believers usually turn a deaf ear. They simply continue their daily religious practice, as if there is no problem whatsoever.

Admittedly, theologians of any religion may discuss these topics, but either they affirm the exclusive position, or come up with inventive but ultimately unsatisfactory answers. For example, to give one well-intentioned but widely criticized example, Karl Rahner suggested[6] that all believers outside Christianity are anonymous Christians. It seems problematic to embrace an open attitude towards other religions and at the same time remain convinced that one's own religion is the true one. Bordering deals effectively with this tall order.

Diversity does not only exist in the field of religions, but is also apparent in the contrasts with secular worldviews. Here too, in this, my second example, obvious questions, currently central to the *God Debate*,[7] are often repressed. Believers of bordering religions tend to ignore the challenge of the atheist view, even though it is increasingly claiming presence in public debate. Some believers may enter into a crisis of faith, but the majority is not bothered by the pressing questions that the spokespersons for atheism raise. To these faithful, the God debate is a nothing debate.

The third issue that commonly receives little attention in bordering religious groups is the sociological fact that *power* is an inevitable component of all social relations, including the religious context. Power can

6. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 283.

7. Dawkins, *God Delusion*; Hitchens, *God is Not Great*; Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist*.

be defined as *the human capacity to influence other people's behavior, even against their will*. Power is needed to organize any group, since without it the community would be laid to waste by incompatible individual interests. Within religions, power is as present as it is anywhere. The use of violence, a tool often resorted to by those in power or seeking to be in power, is justified religiously, in its most extreme form in contemporary acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, the presence of power in relationships is easily ignored, especially when a religion's core values preach equality or neighborly love and condemn oppression. Power is not a prominent word in religious vocabularies, except when divine power is referred to. Only when a conflict causes upheaval does the distribution of power within or between religious organizations receive attention. Religious diversity may result from power conflicts between factions. But even under harmonious conditions, the question of what the application of power does to a religious group can be raised. Usually this question does not come up, not even in bordering religions, although they present a case in point, since border control requires the active wielding of power.

My final example concerns global problems. The four main *global problems* (i.e., poverty, violence, pollution, and conflict over differences of any kind) often have religious dimensions. Religions may justify these problems in their doctrines and accept them as normal. Admittedly, to varying degrees, religions seek solutions to the four problems and potentially contain the moral justification to do so. Commonly, believers only see their religion's constructive values, convinced that their religion helps solve the current predicament. Rigid borders may render an awareness of a religion's role more difficult. "Other" religions may, for example, be criticized for their disastrous performance in these four problem areas. Yet the question of how a religion can simultaneously be a cause of any of these four problems, and pretend to be able to solve them, is often ignored. How contradictory can believers, and especially their leaders, allow themselves to be? Religions, while causing and legitimating large-scale affliction and conflict, often ignore or deny their complicit role, or point to the role of other factions. Unless the matter becomes breaking news on CNN, the role of religions is not often drawn into question.

The reader may note that these examples seem to nourish a severe critique of religion, and not only in relation to the so-called God Debate. Although some authors writing from an atheist perspective are puzzled by the phenomenon of repressed questions and issues, my book is not another

attempt to condemn or repudiate religion. As I will show in this book, religions can be criticized without seeking their extinction. What is more, I suggest that if religious leaders take frequently repressed questions to heart, their religions will have a bright future and will significantly contribute to the wellbeing of humanity. Their religions may even be able to compensate for their anti-human pasts, which attracted rightful atheist criticism. Several anti-religious vindications would then become less pertinent. Terrorism would lose its reason for existence and be reduced to a dark page in the history of religions. In the meantime, we should not forget that there are also a few dark pages in the history of atheism. Moreover, as I will suggest, there is more similarity between religion and atheism than either atheists or believers would care to admit.

Walls

What happens in the bordering process? In all four examples relating to ignored questions and issues, whether the issue is diversity, the God Debate, power, or global problems, bordering religious groups raise walls that protect their own values and meaning-making systems against alternative views. Thanks to the construction of the wall, inconvenient questions can authoritatively be ignored. Although there may be gates and crevices in the wall, the bordering religion fences itself in and its adherents off from what is "out there." The wall is presented as normal, legitimated by seemingly fireproof presuppositions and logic, and often authorized by divine blessing.

Thus a social construct is transformed into a natural *raison d'être*. "We" cannot possibly exist without excluding "them." Most questions about the assumptions of this construct belong to the category of repressed thoughts and are thus silenced. The leadership may have the right to take disciplinary measures against dissenters. Identity consciousness is well developed within such groups, including the tendency to divide the world down dualistic lines, using strong oppositions, such as the line between insiders and outsiders. The message may serve this dualism, to the point that ripples in the edifice must surface. Are these boundaries meant to protect the key message, or does it work the other way around? And is the message formulated in such a way as to legitimate boundary maintenance?

One would surmise that the current process of globalization, the process by which the world is experienced as one place, opens the gates, or

at least makes fissures in the border walls that surround religious groups. Globalization might be expected to open out religious enclaves that tend to pose as the one and only site of salvation, the closed world being substituted by the all-encompassing global world. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the process of modernization, defined as the application of the results of science and technology in society, may be expected to make life more rational, threatening the brittle edifice of religious worldviews, by imposing a scientific image of the world. Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin have played their parts in this transformation. Science and rationality would seem likely to stimulate new questions. Besides, the modern fragmentation of society, an indirect result of modernization, divides people's experience with their world over a number of autonomous contexts, reduces the impact of religious organizations, and exiles them to their own territory. Thus more room for critical views is created.

Yet, globalization, modernization, and fragmentation do not succeed in bringing down the walls of bordering religions, even though they will cause cracks to occur. The inner logic that justifies the bordering view is left intact. Moreover, as is the case with fundamentalism, the reaction to any degradation of the wall may be to reinforce the boundaries, repair the cracks, and secure the gates. Paradoxically, strict religious views, although seemingly pre-modern, represent a cogent recipe to deal with the modern world and are even triggered by it.[8] The prediction contained within the so-called secularization thesis,[9] that religious worldviews will be substituted by rational worldviews, did not come to pass. The problem of repressed questions in bordering religious contexts continues to be as real as it ever was.

One warning is needed as we look for explanations. When we ask how—for heaven's sake—people can ignore obvious questions, the presupposition is that human beings, when reflecting on their world, would follow the rational approach that characterizes science and accept only empirical knowledge as valid. Yet, reflection does not occur in a vacuum. Human meaning-making cannot escape the social and cultural framework.

8. Almond et al., *Rise of Fundamentalisms*; Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism*; Lawrence, "From Fundamentalism to Fundamentalisms"; Marty, *Fundamentalisms Observed*; Shupe, "Religious Fundamentalism."

9. Berger et al., *Religious America, Secular Europe?* Casanova, *Public Religions*; Davie, *Sociology of Religion,* 46–66; Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*; Dobbelaere, "The Meaning and Scope of Secularization"; Davie et al., *Predicting Religion*; Hunt, *Religion in Western Society*.

Moreover, human beings are not entirely rational, having other, sometimes contrary, abilities. Bordering therefore occurs more widely than expected. In discussing the matter of ignored questions, this warning should not be forgotten.

From Powerful to Playful

Believers who, in spite of the human cost, ignore questions regarding diversity, truth, the role of power, the atheist critique, and religions' role in the four global problem areas, show the rigidity of the bordering view and the imperviousness of the walls around them. How can we understand this phenomenon? Is there a theoretical and conceptual framework that can be applied to all four examples? Could such an approach offer possible ways to improve the quality of humanity's life, reducing the human cost that bordering religions and other worldviews bring with them?

In what follows, I will explore the potential of an explanatory framework that combines religion, power, and play. Power's part in this approach is obvious, as it prompts a return to one of the four weighty questions just raised. In their exclusivity, bordering religions succeed in directing their adherents' behavior and thus present themselves as powerful religions. Play may be viewed as the surprise guest in this set, but as I will show, it has a crucial role in my approach. Play can be defined as *the human capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality;*[10] subjunctively referring to "as if," in contrast with the indicative "as is."[11] From the cradle onwards, play is a basic human capacity. A child plays in spontaneous and natural ways, transforming a stick into a rocket, a doll into a real baby. The same attitude is active in sports and games, when a different reality is established and dealt with temporarily. Play is also practiced when a joke contains *double entendre*. Play always suggests the existence of an alternative perspective. Though this may sound utopian, one consequence of a playful strategy is that believers of bordering religions may be tempted to breach or even demolish the walls around their religion, opening up the opportunity for reflection on alternatives. This statement needs clarification, and seeking to do this is my main aim in writing this book. Let us start with the basics of religion.

10. Droogers, "Methodological Ludism," 53.

11. Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, 25, 169.

Believers of any religion seek answers to five ultimate questions about any person's individual and social life:[12]

1. why do humans live and die? (the ontological question)

2. what is morally good behavior? (the ethical question)

3. what can be trusted as being true? (the epistemological question)

4. what can be considered beautiful? (the aesthetic question)

5. and therefore, in considering the answers to these questions: who am I, who are we? (the identity question)

So far, religions may seem to present exclusive answers to these questions. My thesis is that in this globalized era, humanity is better served by playful religions, facilitating access to, reflection on, and communication between alternative answers. I seek to redefine religions' role in the world. I trust that, in taking a playful approach, believers, especially in bordering religions, will feel invited to re-contextualize their answers to the five ultimate existential questions. The human cost borne of exclusive religious activity can then be reduced. Those repressed questions regarding diversity, the God debate, power, and global problems can finally be faced.

In developing the playful approach, I will suggest that behavior-directing power mechanisms—rigidly held in bordering religions—tend to restrict the believers' tendency to play with meanings as they seek answers to existential questions. Established power demands unconditional acceptance of unquestionable answers. Those in power are assisted by complacency. Once a limited but satisfactory answer to an existential question is provided, people tend to accept it, despite there being alternative answers available.

Play, when viewed as the human capacity to deal simultaneously with two ways of classifying reality, makes the alternatives apparent. Those in power wish to ignore these alternatives because they threaten their interests. The rehabilitation of play as a religious tool, in combination with the critical surveillance of power as a factor that tends to restrain the playful search for alternatives, will change the process of meaning-making as well as transforming power relations themselves. Symbolic of this transformation, the four examples mentioned above will change. Previously ignored questions regarding diversity, the God debate, religious power, and global

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12. Cf. Hijmans and Smaling, "Over de relatie tussen kwalitatief onderzoek en levensbeschouwing," 16–19. See also Droogers and Harskamp, *From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*.

problem areas, can be raised afresh. Repressed questions become pressing questions. Alternatives can be considered.

This Book

In the first chapter of this book, taking a short story by Gabriel García Márquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," as my starting-point, I will explore what religion is about. In chapter two, I will seek to define the human condition, thus exploring the main source from which religion springs. These preparations lead the way into the third chapter, in which, after providing an inventory of the qualities that a theory of religion should contain, I will present my own approach. "Bordering" religions are considered in the light of this theory. In chapter four, I discuss power and the characteristics of a power-driven religion. As an illustration, I begin with a self-authored sequel to Márquez's story. How much room can power come to occupy in a religious situation? How does bordering occur and in what ways are inconvenient questions repressed? In chapter five, I describe the characteristics of a playful religion. In what sense can religion be playful? Chapter six applies what we have discussed so far to the four repressed questions with which I started. How can the move to a playful religion be accomplished? When we go from a religion in which power is all-consuming to a playful religion, how can diversity, the God debate, leadership, and global problems respectively be reconsidered? In relations between religions and secular worldviews, once the playful approach is embraced, common ground can be looked for, instead of the usual contrasts and rivalries. Can religion be made more sustainable, in the service of the world as humanity's place of abode? Should religious education change its framework? And what are the consequences of the playful approach for the study of religion? The conclusion winds up the argument.

The core message of this book is that religion can be perceived in a more playful way. The only condition is that we become aware of the impact that power processes exert on religions. The bordering process, in its violent as well as in its moderate forms, is an expression of how power works and how play is ignored. Religious criticism by atheists focuses predominantly on the abuse of power by gods and believers. In adopting the playful perspective, religion can be viewed from a radically different frame. Power can be shown to work against the primary intentions of the religious *habitus*. Even though power can never be avoided, play, as the serious wielding

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of a double perspective, is in fact much closer to the source and intention of religion than power itself, including divine power. The fact that religion is scarcely associated with play is an illustration of the icy chill that power structures impose on religions. *Homo Hierarchicus* has sent *Homo Ludens* into exile—from where he must be liberated.

Besides, the playful perspective shows a way out of the digital yes-or-no stalemate that is characteristic of the God Debate trench war. It emphasizes the common elements in theist and atheist worldviews, instead of stereotypical contrasts. The approach through play explores a new theory of religion, beyond antithetical thinking. Moreover, this approach offers a plausible understanding of the differences between religions without taking the tendency to uphold borders as natural, and also—the other extreme—without ending up in global syncretism. The playful view on religion takes the sting out of the God Debate and out of conflicts between believers of different religions.

Though nourished by debates in the study of religion, the applied nature of this book's central argument suggests the need for a type of discourse that deviates from the standard approach in that discipline. My approach is personal and subjective, witnessing to my own path as a believer, a style that is usually frowned upon within the discipline. In writing this book, I sought to go beyond the objective standard style that is thought to be the academic ideal. Each chapter ends with a poem that summarizes part of the chapter's argument in a different manner.

Essentially, this book seeks to change the role that religions and believers play in global society. Believers should learn to wink, playing the religious game in a serious way, taking what is meant seriously, but in a playful way. Peaceful coexistence between believers with different convictions will then become much easier. Standard elements of atheist discourse will evaporate. The most powerful religion will prove to be a playful religion.