Part III

Contemporary Practices of Representing Europe

Imagining Europe across Borders

A Religious Studies Approach

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1. Introduction

Having grown up in Austria in the *Dreiländereck* region where Austria (Kärnten), Italy (Friuli Venezia Giulia), and Slovenia (or what was Yugoslavia in my childhood) and their borders meet, I can still vividly remember the many border crossings into both countries with my family. After all, Slovenia and Italy are just a 25-minute drive away. I also still remember the annoyances that came with the border crossings before Austria (and later Slovenia) joined the European Union and the Schengen region: Austrian border and customs officers frisked Austrians who had popped over to Italy or Slovenia for lunch or dinner to search for smuggled cigarettes or fuel which were, at the time, much cheaper across the border. These border and customs checks often turned a short drive into something that seemed an eternity for the child I was who was not very keen on being inside a car when it was standing still. Why, I often asked, do we have to wait so long for something that seemed so utterly banal. Failing to grasp the relevance and solemnity with which (some) people imbue these arbitrary lines, I struggled to see the necessity for border checks at all. Yes, people spoke a different language, yes, the food was different, and yes, the architecture looked different, but in the grand scheme of things, everything was fairly similar for me on either side of the border: the trees were still green. The *Dreiländereck* also shows how different borders have their distinct dynamics: crossing into Yugoslavia was not as frequent for me and came with an entirely different politi-

cal system. Its eventual collapse brought fighting to the Austrian-Slovenian border during the Slovenian Independence War in 1991. During that time, Austria stationed 7,500 soldiers in the border region to secure the borders and Austrian territory.[1]

The antipode to my childhood experience came later in my final year of high school. Austria voted to join the European Union on 12 June 1994, became an EU member state on 1 January 1995 and ratified the Schengen Agreement on 28 April 1995. At the time, I was studying Italian in high school and to mark the occasion of Austria's EU membership, our Italian teacher took our class to the Austrian-Italian border where we attended a small ceremony to celebrate Austria's EU membership, the fall of borders, and the new opportunities for the two border regions to grow closer. While I was not overly impressed and probably bored at the time, since then, this ceremony has turned into a key moment that defined my attitude towards borders and border regions, and how I relate Austria (and other EU member states) to the idea of »Europe« and the construct that is called the »European Union«. Today, I no longer recall details of the event, and while it was a further three years, 1 April 1998, before border controls between Austria, Italy, and Germany were finally a thing of the past, I do recall (or imagine such a memory) that during the ceremony at the border, a border boom gate was symbolically removed or opened. Whether real or imagined, I have come to associate that very memory with a sense of mobility, freedom and the ability to breathe in the world in quite a bodily and sensory way.

Borders are many things at the same time for different people: they can provide a sense of security and safety or be a threatening warning sign; they can be easily crossed by some but not by others; they are permeable and impermeable all at the same time; they can inhibit relationships and crossings at the same time as they enable them. These sometimes invisible and immaterial, at other times visible and material lines have legal implications and impose themselves not only onto the public and political imagination but also have an impact on a material level and on material practices. This was most evident in the pre-Euro era when crossing that line had material-monetary implications of having to bring different currencies (even if only

1 Some visual material of Austrian forces at the border can be found in the media archives of the Austrian Armed Forces: https://www.bundesheer.at/download_archiv/photos/inlandseinsatz/galerie.php?id=1253&currRubrik=136, accessed August 30, 2022.

for mundane things such as getting a coffee or some food). Yet, pre-Euro monetary practices in border regions also show how permeable these border lines can be since a number of restaurants and stores across the border in Italy also accepted the Austrian Schilling. However, I do not recall any Austrian restaurants or stores advertising »we accept the Italian Lira«. These monetary practices raise questions about the cultural, social, economic, and political relationships of and between either side of the border. What political, economic or cultural interests or dependencies shape the relationship between either side of the border, what hierarchies are being created, subverted, or reinforced?

Borders play a key role in the imagination of individuals, groups, communities, and states. The news on German public TV, the ARD Tagesschau, on 1 April 1998 made these links between borders and imagination most explicit when they reported the end of border controls between Austria, Germany, and Italy. For car loving Germans this meant being able to drive practically across Europe, from the north of Germany to the south of Italy, without border controls: »Europe has yet again grown closer. Since midnight, there are no border controls anymore between Germany, Austria, and Italy, and the barriers have come down even at the major checkpoints […] green light from Flensburg to Palermo.«[2]

Since then, however, the terrorist attacks in France and what was labelled the migrant crisis have materially changed things at the borders. Several countries, including Germany and Austria, re-introduced temporary border controls. They were meant to last for only six months, in line with EU regulations, but Germany, for example, seems to keep extending these temporary border controls in perpetuity. Is this the end of free movement, of open borders, what was hailed as the green light from Flensburg to Palermo, and what seems like a fragile idea of »Europe«? In this paper, I am interested in the material and visual dimension that borders introduce and in how Europeans and border crossers might experience both Europe's external borders (i. e. the Schengen Zone) and the EU's internal borders.

2 ARD aktuell 1998: »Europa ist erneut ein Stück weiter zusammengewachsen. Seit Mitternacht gibt es keine Grenzkontrollen mehr zwischen Deutschland, Österreich und Italien, auch an den großen Übergängen fielen jetzt die Schlagbäume […] freie Fahrt von Flensburg bis Palermo« (translation by the author, accessed September 7, 2021).

The term »Europe« is ambiguous in popular usage: »Europe« sometimes refers to the institution of the European Union, sometimes to a vaguely (un)defined continental Europe that may include non-EU member states such as Switzerland, or the geographic region that is part of the Eurasia landmass. »Europe« can sometimes also refer to what seems like a mystical whole: an idea that seems linked to a particular geographic region but is seen as the cradle of »western« civilisation that sees itself as the heritage of Greco-Roman, enlightened (and Christian) culture and (male) thinkers. This idea of Europe as a whole, feeds into discussions of »a« European identity, European culture, European citizenship. Diversity features prominently in such a holistic understanding of Europe. The European Union, for example, has as its motto »United in diversity«[3]. Yet, this unity is fraught with tensions, the political and economic self-interests of member states, and endless debates over perceived core European values. Unity and unitedness, the mystical whole that »Europe« sometimes refers to, seems to exist not in diversity but only ever as fragmented pieces that are in constant tension between attraction and repulsion, like pieces of magnets that keep switching their magnetic poles. These tensions between attraction and repulsion become most visible in public and political imaginations of borders and border discourses of both the EU's external and internal borders and the internal and external borders of the Schengen Zone.

For the purposes of this paper, I am particularly interested in the internal borders of the Schengen Zone and the experience of crossing the border or being at the border: if (internal) borders are no longer enforced, do they lose their power in public and popular discourse and as a space for liminal experiences? I will argue that a religious studies approach to border narratives, border politics, and border imaginings can help to better understand why borders are forces to be reckoned with, forces that undergo and resist change at the same time. In a first step, I will very briefly provide some key thoughts from the flourishing field of border studies. In the second step, I will argue for a religious studies approach to borders, or: why it is important to think about borders religiously. In the third and final step, I will reflect on the Austrian-Italian border checkpoint I frequently crossed as a child and the art project by photographer Tristan Poyser through which he attempted to

3 European Union 2022.

visualise the omnipresence of the (invisible) border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These two examples allow me to provide visual and material support for why a religious studies approach to borders *as* borders is helpful. My argument relies on narratives and fragments of narratives, visual material, and anecdotes because, as David Newman argues: »It is at the level of narrative, anecdote and communication that borders come to life.«[4] Unless otherwise noted, »borders« in this article refers to borders between sovereign nation states.

2. Inside/outside, or: Imagining borders

Borders are contested »things«, spaces, ideological inscriptions, narratives, spectacles, and political, economic, and often racialised practices. Border studies has often focused on how borders regulate social, economic, and political interactions.[5] Specifically in a European context, border studies have focused on the role of borders in European integration. These discussions of European integration focused on how borders and the spaces and territories they created were seen as both a source of public anxiety and political exploitation as well as an opportunity for better cultural, economic, and political cross-border collaboration, in particular in border regions. When Austria joined the Schengen Zone, for example, or Eastern European countries were admitted into the EU and Schengen Zone, there was public fearmongering that Eastern Europeans will drive Austrians out of their jobs. Viewed more positively, borders and the cultural differences they created (in people's imagination or observable differences) were seen as opportunities for a more vibrant cultural exchange benefitting border regions and beyond. In other words: borders provide rich material for cultural, economic, and political narratives that fuel the public imagination of Europe, the European Union as institution and cultural, political, and economic project, as well as the role of individual countries within the structure and hierarchy of the EU (such as the tensions between smaller and bigger countries, longstanding EU members and newcomers, countries that see themselves as the

4 With reference to field studies by Augosto Carli, Doris Wastl-Walter and others, Newman 2006, 152.

5 Wilson/Donnan 2012, 9.

»core« of the Union). Discussions about borders in Europe then also focus on the challenges internal and external borders bring with them such as police cooperation and the transnational and cross-border dimension of crime.[6]

The borders of a nation state may seem (fairly) stable but, as discussions about the »migrant crisis« or Russia's invasion of Ukraine show, can easily come under threat. As Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan argue, »borders require continual reinscription and reperformance, on the part of citizens, governments and other institutions and groups both within the state and beyond it.«[7] In this context, borders fulfil (and are required to fulfil) multiple purposes all at the same time. Louise Amoore testifies to this complex multiplicity when she argues:

> emergent forms of bordering seek to reconcile security with mobility and sovereignty with economy. […] No longer strictly a matter of disciplinary practices that stop, prohibit, enclose, delimit or proscribe, the work of the contemporary border is conducted in and through movement itself.[8]

The question of who and what might be able and allowed to move across borders, representations and imaginaries of borders that give rise to and are shaped by security and mobility discourses raise complex ethical issues. Proponents of borders often – and often for various reasons – argue that borders can provide a framework and guidance in an increasingly complex world, that they can give people a sense of rootedness and connection, in other words a sense of belonging, geographically and socially, and that they can form a key ingredient in identity negotiations.[9] Frank Furedi, for example, argues that to think the »main purpose« of borders is to »promote and reinforce extreme nationalism« is to misunderstand borders. He holds that opponents of borders not only dismiss arguments that justify the existence of borders, e. g. for security purposes, often too quickly and easily, but that they all too often name and shame proponents of borders.[10] Critics of borders,

6 Wilson/Donnan 2012, 17–18.
7 Wilson/Donnan 2012, 19.
8 Johnson/Jones/Paasi/Amoore/Mountz/Salter/Rumford 2011, 64.
9 Cf. Scott 2020, 7–8.
10 Cf. Furedi 2021, 1.

on the other hand, argue that border proponents often fall short in addressing the ethical challenges borders bring,[11] such as the inside/outside binaries they re-inscribe, issues related to gender, race, racism, and power dynamics.

In discussions about the ethical values and challenges of borders, it is important to keep in mind that borders are not neutral: they are institutional(ised), imagined, lived, practiced and enacted by the state and its agents as well as the general population crossing borders. The experienced complexities of borders as sometimes enforced lines and at other times blurry spaces crystallise individual experiences as much as power interests and power dynamics. Borders are as much a reaction to social, political, and economic pressures and interests as they are producers of such pressures and interests. »Borders«, as James W. Scott argues, »provide ontological security and enable communities to thrive; they can also be violent tools of exclusion and discrimination.«[12]

Adding to the complexity of tangible, intangible, visible, invisible, materialised and immaterial borders are imaginations of future borders and border crossings using digital technologies. In particular in an airport setting (but also extending beyond airports), borders and security checks are envisioned to be highly connected, digital, invisible, frictionless, automated, and proactive: »The future border will be an invisible one for the majority of citizens and traders.«[13] And it is in this climate of ambivalence and fluidity, and the spaces that it creates, that lived (and sometimes deadly) experiences of borders play out. While state borders are often made visible through signs and border infrastructure, borders and the idea of borders are not merely linked to notions of sovereignty or geography but expand to, evolve around, and give rise to cultural practices and identity negotiations.

Looking at water, water bottles, and the equipment illegal migrants might need to cross the Mexican-US border, Barbara Andrea Sostaita, for example, shows how the border and the space of the borderlands gives rise to very particular practices and a very particular economy catering to the needs of those wanting to cross the Mexican-US border bypassing border controls.[14] Sostaita's study makes explicit that while state borders often seem perma-

11 Cf. Scott 2020, 8–9.
12 Scott 2020, 9.
13 Canham/Voet 2020.
14 Cf. Sostaita 2020.

nent and fixed, they are constantly under threat and subject to erosion. They need »border work«, a continuous work of sustaining them and imbuing them with meaning and power.

An important element – or building block – of border work is identity negotiations, specifically discussions of who ought to be on which side of the border and why. In this sense, borders can drive, sometimes determine, and even dictate bodily, corporeal practices, no matter how mundane, which still carry significance. Borders both are and create a biopolitical arena, as Yannis Hamilakis argues.[15] The role borders play in identity negotiations as well as in the biopolitical arena can best be explained by looking at religion as an embodied and bodily practice. In other words, looking at the sense of religious belonging can help make the links between borders and identity particularly tangible and visible. At times there is an imagined, at other times an identifiable difference between what happens on the other side of the border, a difference that manifests itself on a material level, a difference that can be seen, felt, and experienced, such as a Catholic/Protestant us/them or a western Christian us vs. an Arab Muslim other. In particular the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the religious-theological-ideological support the Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarch Kirill offer are helpful examples for understanding the imaginary-ideological aspects of bordering processes and identity negotiations.[16]

3. Bordering, debordering, and shaping imaginaries: A religious studies approach

For the purposes of this paper, I am not so much interested in how religious individuals and communities are shaped by or form their identity in relation to borders (e. g. a Catholic Republic of Ireland and a Protestant Northern Ireland). Neither am I interested in the role borders play in the migration of religious communities or the spreading and mutation of religious beliefs and doctrine within and across borders. Rather, the questions I am asking are: do borders, and how they are imagined and experienced, have a religious dimension? Is there something we can learn about borders – and bor-

15 Hamilakis 2021.

16 Hudson 2022; Kelaidis 2022.

ders in Europe specifically – as well as the spaces and territories they mark out by looking at borders, and processes of bordering and debordering from a religious studies approach? Here I adopt David Chidester's understanding of religion as practices and imaginations that transcend the everyday and the ordinary, and that which is seen as different from the ordinary.[17]

In order to explore the religious dimension of borders I want to start with what I deem a necessary detour and look at the process of globalisation, i. e. the process of removing trade restrictions across borders, facilitating travel, or the global movement of infectious diseases and invasive species. Looking at the ideologies that drive globalisation and their religious dimensions provides a starting point for exploring the religious dimension of borders. Several scholars approach globalisation in and of itself as a religious phenomenon with its institutions, beliefs, rituals, and global culture.[18] Dwight Hopkins, for example, argues that »globalization of monopoly finance capitalist culture is itself a religion. Such a religion feeds on the most vulnerable people in the world theater.«[19] Hopkins defines globalisation as a religion because he understands globalisation as a system of ultimate concern: »the god of globalization embodies the ultimate concern or ground of being where there is a fierce belief in the intense concentration, in a few hands, of monopoly, finance capitalist wealth on the world stage.«[20]

Neoliberalism, in this context, acts as the theological justification of the religious system of globalisation.[21] Adam Kotsko explores the religious and theological dimension of neoliberalism further and argues for understanding neoliberalism as an all-encompassing and holistic worldview:

> Thus neoliberalism is more than simply a formula for economic policy. It aspires to be a complete way of life and a holistic worldview, in a way that previous models of capitalism did not. It is this combination of policy agenda and moral ethos that leads me to designate neoliberalism as a form of political theology.[22]

17 Chidester 2005, 1.
18 Csordas 2009, 9.
19 Hopkins 2001, 8.
20 Hopkins 2001, 9.
21 Hopkins 2001, 16.
22 Kotsko 2018, 6.

Ivan Strenski holds that both social scientists and religious studies scholars have for a long time ignored the role religion and theology might have played as driving force and legitimising framework of economic globalisation.[23] He argues that »today's language of globalization betrays an implicit religious depth« and that Christian theologies were not only »critical in facilitating the rise of today's economic globalization but that their evangelical residues linger on today«.[24] The idea of natural law and its importance in (Catholic) theological thinking was a key ingredient in justifications and rationalisations of freedom of movement and travel:[25]

> In terms of economic globalization, then, what unites these classic [Christian] authors is their unanimous support, often from different legal, philosophical, and religious bases, for the universal and natural human rights and chief among them for the subject of globalization – the right to free passage. All these principal players agreed on the fundamental and unquestioned right to visit and travel in the lands of others and to perform various acts of trade and commerce across national borders. Without this right, there can be no economic globalization.[26]

While (Catholic) theological thinking and recourse to natural law has since lost its driving force, Strenski argues that their heritage and the undercurrents they created still resonate in and underpin some of today's ideological framings and justifications of globalization:

> Yet, although the principle of free passage still needs the enabling agency of positive and deliberately drawn formal treaty commitments, in logic it remains the elemental taken-for-granted, precontractual basis for such positive treaties themselves. Thus, even at the bases of movements of economic globalization, such as those embodied in international trading bodies such as the WTO, it is just *assumed* that it is virtually »natural« – that the world would be a better place for all –

23 Strenski 2004, 632.
24 Strenski 2004, 633.
25 Strenski 2004, 636.
26 Strenski 2004, 645.

> if the free passage/free trade policies of economic globalization were to be ratified by binding treaties.[27]

Thomas Csordas, then, asks to what extent globalisation today might still have a religious dimension: »Does it possess a mythic structure, an eschatological promise, a soteriological message, a magical spontaneity, a moral imperative, a dogmatic inevitability, a demonic urge, an inquisitional universality, a structure of alterity or Otherness that is at some level inescapably religious?«[28]

4. A religious dimension of and to borders?

If we entertain the idea that globalisation has a religious dimension and relevance, and that theological frameworks have contributed to paving the way to globalisation and the idea of free movement of goods and people, it stands to reason that borders, these messy »things« that can facilitate or prevent such freedom of movement, might also be imbued with religious meaning. I argue that borders have such a religious dimension, a dimension that exerts a kind of fascination that takes them out of the everyday and the ordinary. I want to start with two – related – observations as a way to close in on my argument.

4.1. Purity and sexuality

Processes of bordering and debordering are often based on ideas of purity, gender and sexuality, issues of race and racism, or religion. At the same time, bordering discourses often turn these ideas into platforms for these very discourses for particular cultural, political, economic, or political gains. Mehammed Amadeus Mack argues that borders are always symbolically and sexually charged. Border narratives of us/them or in/out do not only define who is in and who is out, but label us/them or insiders/outsiders as male, female, deviant, or the religious other. For example, in discourses of »Frenchness«, France is often imagined as female in need of protection from

27 Strenski 2004, 646, emphasis in the original.

28 Csordas 2009, 10.

oversexualised Arab or Muslim (and thus religiously othered) men. In these gendered imaginaries of the nation state and its threats, religion and sexual orientation (and the hypocrisy that often comes with it) are key ingredients.[29] While it is not the physical or geographic border that is seen as under attack here, it is the imaginary dimension of borders and the territories they create that are portrayed to be under existential threat both from the outside and the inside. As Mary Douglas in her work on purity and danger showed, the fending off of these (imaginary) threats is often framed in narratives of purity and embedded in ritual practices of meaning making through the (de)legitimising of boundaries.[30] Thus religion and the religious and sexualised other play a role in imagining threats to the nation state. Additionally, ideas of gender and sexuality, ideas of purity and narratives and practices that aim to maintain such postulated purity (developed and maintained also with the help of religious practices and ideas) take borders and bordering processes out of the everyday and ordinary and thus situate them in an otherworldly, imaginary, even transcendent realm.

4.2. Reclaiming and policing borders

In today's public and political European imaginaries, some borders (»our« borders) are easily policed whereas other borders (»some other country's« borders) are thought to be not so easily or thoroughly policed. This idea of »our« borders vs. »the other's« border and their policing contributes to public-political debates in Europe in recent years. The Brexit referendum's result was, to a large part, dependent on the idea of »taking back control of our borders«. Taking back control was linked to the idea that if and when »we« have control of »our« borders again, »we« will be able to properly, effectively, and efficiently police them and control who is allowed in and who must stay out. The idea of (reclaiming) sovereignty over the borders of the United Kingdom was part of the Brexit argument. More importantly, however, were transcendent-utopian promises (or delusions) of a post-Brexit land of – quite biblically – milk and honey (Exodus 3:8), a land of plenty in which the National Health Service will prosper, the fishing industry will be freed

29 Mack 2017, 1–33.

30 Douglas 1978.

from the shackles of Brussels, the UK will be able to make new worldwide trade deals with whomever they please, where all will earn higher wages.

The ideas of border policing and reclaiming borders can be linked to religious frameworks with roots dating back millennia.[31] In antiquity, for example, where the policing of the frontiers of sometimes far-stretching empires was less practical if not impossible, religion and the gods served as guarantors of borders and territory. Jeremy McInerney argues that:

> [i]n a society in which the permanent policing of borders was largely inconceivable, the ephebes of classical Athens being a notable exception, control of the farthest reaches of territory depended on compromise and negotiation. This was accomplished through religion. Border treaties were authorized by the gods, and, in extreme instances, border zones were dedicated to the gods, either as the sites of sanctuaries or sacred lands, or both.[32]

Borders and border zones served an additional – and crucial – purpose: to distinguish between human, cultivated (sometimes also labelled civilised) land and wilderness, uncultivated or uncivilised land. Such a distinction between civilised/uncivilised and order/chaos has more often than not been gendered rather than neutral and often featured religious undertones: civilised space, i. e. space made by men, was often gendered male while wilderness and chaos were often labelled female.[33] As David Nye argues, labelling spaces as cultivated/uncultivated or civilised/uncivilised or simply venturing into what (white western) settlers perceived to be vast uninhabited land theirs to take can be seen as a religious enterprise, the crafting of creation narratives and stories of origin that draw on and are linked to ideas of the transcendent.[34]

At first sight, it seems that the ideas of gods acting as markers of borders and guardians of territory, the civilised/uninhabited land divide, and the gendering of spaces are unrelated. Yet, as I have discussed above, religious ideas seem to be the glue that ties these unrelated processes together: venturing

31 Goetz 2000; Ben Eliyahu 2019.
32 McInerney 2006, 34.
33 Cf. McInerney 2006, 39.
34 Nye 2003.

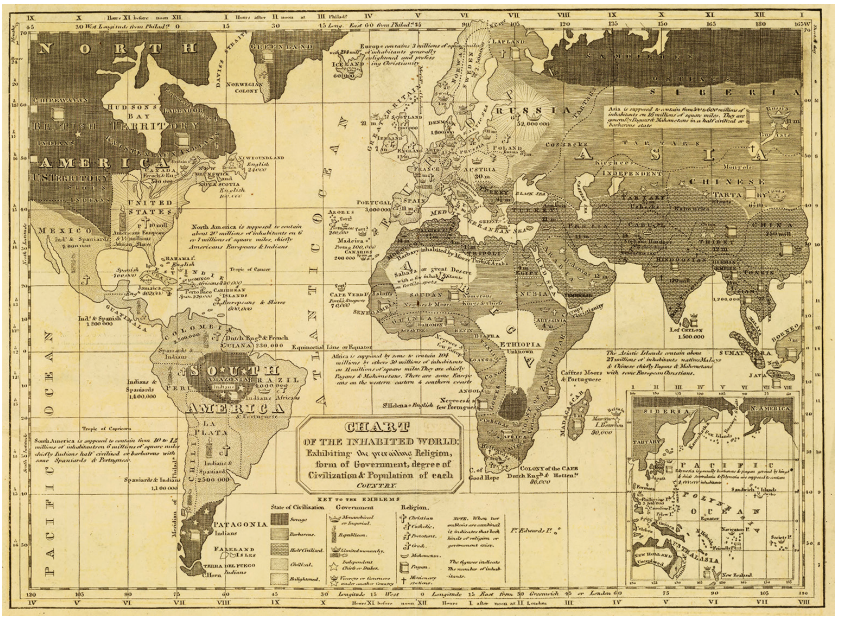

Fig. 1: Woodbridge's chart aims to visualise religion, form of government, and degree of civilisation through colour-coding and the use of symbols. William C. Woodbridge, *Moral and Political Chart of the Inhabited World*, 24 × 16 cm, in: Woodbridge 1821/1824, image 4 of 11. David Rumsey Map Collection at Stanford University Libraries.[35]

beyond known/civilised frontiers is a religious enterprise; and the gendered territory is always also a religious territory. While institutionalised religion plays an ambivalent role in Europe, religious ideas and frameworks continue to resonate in the way European borders and territories are imagined. In other words: religion and religious framing not only tie together different spaces and processes of making spaces but are also key driving forces in imagining borders and the spaces they create and separate.

An example of how religion was employed in marking spaces and territories as civilised/uncivilised is the American geographer William C. Woodbridge's *Moral and Political Chart of the Inhabited World* from 1821. Woodbridge's chart aims to visualise religion, form of government, and (perceived) degree of civilisation through colour-coding and the use of symbols (fig. 1).

35 Source: http://purl.stanford.edu/fj299xp1087 (accessed September 19, 2022).

Whether intentionally or not, it is quite clear that religion (specifically western Christianity) is employed as delimiter and differentiator of degrees of civilisation and enlightenment. In his chart, the symbols denoting religious affiliation are more than mere information about the »prevailing religion«. Rather, the map simply would not work without these religious labels. Western Christianity equals enlightenment equals republican, monarchical or imperial forms of government equals »civilisation«. In other words, the less western Christian, the less enlightened an area or country is portrayed. It is interesting to note that Christianity does not automatically grant enlightenment status adding an ambivalent and subversive element to this chart that would deserve a more detailed discussion in a separate paper. Russia, for example, is marked as barbarous with some enlightened spots. Italy and Greece are only marked as civilised but not enlightened, placing them in the same category as parts of Mexico, Columbia and other South American areas. It is also interesting to note that Woodbridge's 1827 version of the chart dropped the category »enlightened« and merged it with »civilised«.

Woodbridge's map shows that religion matters when drawing, labelling, and making sense of borders and territories for political and economic purposes. These religious undercurrents remain mostly ignored in contemporary European political discussions but they continue to resonate and exert power in a range of socio-cultural and political debates. I have mentioned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its theological framework before; they are also present in narratives around the migrant crisis in Europe; they contribute to the rise of the political right across Europe; they are part of what shapes ideas around food and food security; and they are key ingredients in the creation of value systems by various political and social actors.[36]

5. Imagining Europe with and at the border

Having explored the idea that imagining borders and processes of (de)bordering can carry religious meaning, I now return to the starting point of this paper: being at the border and crossing it. These acts seem to attract a certain fascination. When I drove to the »old« border crossing (i. e. on the

36 Downing 2010; Schulson 2015; Beal 2022; Davie/Leustean 2022.

Fig. 2: View of Austria from the in-between space of the Austrian and Italian border infrastructure at the Thörl Maglern crossing. Photograph by the author.

B-road before the A2 *Südautobahn* connecting Tarvisio in Italy and Arnoldstein in Austria was built in the 1980s) in summer 2021 to take images, I was not the only person there.

A family from Germany (judging by their German license plate) and a family on their bikes (presumably also tourists) joined me in taking images from and of the in-between space at the Austrian and Italian border checkpoints (figs. 2, 3 and 5). My motivation for taking these images was for inclusion in this paper – but what was theirs? It seems that standing bodily at or on the border in this in-between space radiates a certain fascination. But what exactly is it that fascinates us in this space? Is it the liminality of the neither-here-nor-there, the in-between space as transitory and transitional space or is it a romanticised view of borders, border checkpoints, and the theatricality of borders acted out and embodied by state agents when crossing a border?

The question of theatricality (or lack thereof) adds an additional level of complexity and richness in particular when being at the »old« Austrian-Italian border near Arnoldstein: the border control buildings' best days are long gone. The faded colour of the paint, the closed doors and empty rooms radiate

Fig. 3: The Austrian border infrastructure at the Thörl Maglern crossing. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4: Only after some searching in the in-between space made possible by the lack of border controls could I find the border line. Photograph by the author.

their loss of purpose – like a theatre stage that's no longer in use but with the props left on stage (fig. 5). Yet, when I was there, they were not abandoned altogether. A small number of cars, including police cars, were parked outside the buildings (fig. 3). The space's liminality between still-being-used-and-abandoned was not necessarily due to the lack of people crossing the border at this checkpoint: while this border checkpoint is not a busy one, people use it to pop to Italy for pizza or coffee in the shops just beyond the border when they do not want to drive all the way to Tarvisio.

Driving across the border and past the buildings on either side, the emptied cubicles (fig. 5) make it clear that border checks are (or at least should be) a thing of the past. The meaning that is attached to that past and the used-but-not buildings, however, remains ambiguous, ambivalent, and subject to the individual's perception of past and present. To some, like myself, the mostly abandoned buildings bear witness to a past in which Austria seemed less connected, less open to the world outside, or – literally – on the other side. For others, these decaying buildings might hold romantic value as remnants of the olden, better, days when »we« Austrians had more control over border movements, when Austrian culture and demographics was »more« Austrian, when one might be reminded of the battles once fought, or as the *Kärntner Heimatlied* with its fourth paragraph added by Agnes Maria Millonig in 1928 states:

> Where men's bravery and women's loyalty
> Our homeland sucessfully contended
> Where borderes were drawn in blood
> And remained free in hardship and death;
> The jubilant cheers resonate from the mountain face:
> This is my glorious homeland.[37]

From learning the *Kärnter Heimatlied* in primary school, I still remember how this paragraph and the blood marking Austria's borders were linked to the teaching of history. While I do not want to suggest that we were taught a

37 »Wo Mannesmut und Frauentreu'/Die Heimat sich erstritt aufs neu'/Wo man mit Blut die Grenze schrieb/Und frei in Not und Tod verblieb;/Hell jubelnd klingt's zur Bergeswand:/Das ist mein herrlich Heimatland.« Translated by the author, https://www.ktn.gv.at/Politik/Landtag/Wissenswertes/Kaerntner-Heimatlied (accessed June 26, 2022).

Fig. 5: View of Italy from the space between the Austrian and Italian border infrastructure at the Thörl Maglern crossing. The ITALIA country sign has been adorned with stickers by people crossing the border. Photograph by the author.

nationalist agenda (or that my primary school teacher had such an agenda), it serves as an example of how borders are imbued with symbolic meanings in a range of different contexts. It also serves as an example that the lines between a romanticised view of the past and an extreme right-wing nationalist agenda can be blurry and their discourses of borders can be fuelled by a range of sources.

And yet, people seem to be attracted by this in-between-ness where nothing happens, certainly no lengthy queues of people waiting for customs officers to search cars for cigarettes like in my childhood. This in-between-ness as well as the material and visual objects present (fig. 4) in this liminal space also invite material and visual practices. The »ITALIA« border sign, for example, has been marked by people crossing the border with a range of stickers (fig. 5). These stickers are testimony to the presence of people in this border area, but more importantly, they bear witness to the absence of state agents with their border practices that ensures the movement of people while at the same time policing and regulating such movement. The stickers found at the »ITALIA« sign also bear witness to tourism at the border and cross-border tourism. Local communities have often tried to encourage cross-border tourism as a means to support the community and to foster cross-border collaboration. Cycling routes such as the Alpe-Adria Cycling Route, which runs

across the »old« border connecting Austria (Salzburg) to Italia (Grado), count among some of these popular activities.[38] Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola argues that

> [c]ross-border tourism development in European internal border regions can be regarded as indicative of the process of European integration. Place-making in tourism provides for a spatial reorganisation of political landscapes, and also for the creation of new spatial and social images to replace the national ones. In this context, borders, their symbolic meaning and ideological dimensions are often seen as an economic resource.[39]

In the context of the »old« Austrian-Italian border, the idea of place-making raises the question what kind of place-making happened at the border? Other than the cycling route inviting locals and tourists to cross the border and enjoy refreshments at bars that existed when borders were still enforced, it seems that the old border has not attracted any place-making practices. In this regard, the »old« border can be viewed as a non-place that in itself is ambiguous and sits in-between what it is and what it ought to be.

The notion of the border and borderland as a non-place might help us better understand the visual and material make-up of another complex and complicated border: the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the UK. Once an internal border but not quite since it was not part of the Schengen Zone, the Brexit referendum has transformed the Irish border into an external border, but also not quite because border and customs checks are performed and enforced elsewhere. The Irish border is a contested border with a history of violence, yet with the European Single Market Act in the early 1990s and the Good Friday agreement in 1998, a process of debordering started that has rendered the border mostly invisible. In his photographic art project, *Invisible In-between: An Englishman's Search for the Irish Border*,[40] photographer Tristan Poyser explores the Irish border, its (in)visibility, the tensions this (in)visibility might hide, and the impact of the Brexit referendum result on the local community (figs. 6 and 7). In a YouTube interview, Poyser states that he was interested in

38 Stoffelen 2018.
39 Prokkola 2010, 224–5.
40 Poyser 2019.

Fig. 6: Tristan Poyser, *Invisible In-between*. © Tristan Poyser, courtesy of the artist.[41]

Fig. 7: Tristan Poyser, *Invisible In-between*. © Tristan Poyser, courtesy of the artist.[42]

41 Source: https://www.tristanpoyser.com/gallery-image/Torn-Archival-Prints/G00006koCZk4.0vs/I0000uY1mDHlKkWo/C0000RFxtfhDX5cI, (accessed June 24, 2022).

42 Source: https://www.tristanpoyser.com/gallery-image/Torn-Archival-Prints/G00006koCZk4.0vs/I0000U7GVMOjqirA/C0000RFxtfhDX5cI, (accessed June 24, 2022).

> how one quick irreparable action, such as tearing a photograph or voting in a referendum, impacts other people. And how it's important to consider the impact of our actions […] and how they affect others, especially in places we've not been to or in situations we don't understand.[43]

For his photographic project, Poyser travelled and photographed the entirety of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. To make the invisible visible, he then tore the photographs (figs. 6 and 7):

> The materiality of the border is shown through a physical tear, making the invisible, visible. The act of tearing creates uneasiness, evoking notions of the political and economic tensions surrounding the border's position within the Brexit negotiations, symbolising the divorce of the UK from the 27 remaining states. The Invisible In-between shows the viewer the reality of the border & encourages them to explore the intangible nature & uneasiness surrounding it.[44]

At the time of writing this article, the EU and the UK are involved in a dispute over the Irish border and post-Brexit customs practices. Poyser documented the – at the time – invisibility of the Irish border. This invisibility was crucial and the UK Government, in utopian-populistic language, promised that through invisible smart border technology, the smooth travel of goods and people would be maintained. Smart border technology has not (yet) fulfilled these utopian promises of invisibility but both smart border technology and Poyser's project highlight that invisibility has a material dimension. And it is this very materiality, even if hidden and invisible, that links the imaginary of borders to the way people experience them and their impact.

How can we link Poyser's project to the religious studies approach to borders I am proposing in this paper? In his foreword to Poyser's *Invisible In-between*, Garrett Carr argues:

> Poyser went further than just photographing the route of this invisible frontier. He has taken hold of the physical photographs and ripped

43 Belfast Exposed 2019.

44 Poyser 2019.

> them along the borderline. Each tear is, I think, a stroke of brilliance. It is more of an act than a mark, although it has left a visual record of itself, and it is more eloquent than one hundred newspaper articles about the border. The tears capture something of the uneasiness of the border, and suggest a deeply felt misfortune. It is usually divorces or family estrangements that make us tear photographs, something has to have gone badly wrong for us to make the tear. We must have abandoned hope; we must have accepted that something is not getting put back together. Nobody meant it to turn out this way, but yet there it is and there is no way back. Although Ireland's border is currently much discussed by politicians and journalists its land and people are little known or understood. This landscape is at a far remove from the garbled debates that are shaping its future. Ultimately, I think, Poyser's work speaks of the hidden damage that can be done when places are forgotten.[45]

The tearing of the photographs and the rupture this creates can be linked to a religious studies approach to borders if we remember that the notions of and tensions between continuity and rupture play a key role in Christian identity negotiations. In conversion narratives, for example, converts often talk about their conversion journey as experience of continuity or rupture of space and time.[46] Joel Robbins suggests we can understand rupture as »profoundly felt personal experience – of the undoubted presence of Pauline moments of intense personal disruption in some person's encounters with Christian or revolutionary models of change«[47] The EU's borders, internal as well as external, can thus be understood as ruptures of space and time: and it is that very rupture they create that attracts tourists, invites people to linger or take photographs, or encourages material practices such as marking one's presence by leaving stickers at border signs.

I want to push the religious studies approach to borders further and argue – provocatively – that they resemble »thorns of alterity«[48]. The otherness that borders create or make visible through the ruptures they impose are an

45 Carr 2018.
46 Farnetti 2019; Robbins 2019; Sarró 2019.
47 Robbins 2019, 227.
48 Larcher 2010.

ingredient in identity discourses. Yet, as Ramon Sarró points out, rupture needs to be seen as something that is closely related to the notion of healing and repair.[49] As such, borders can remind us of these violent processes that drive human communities apart and at the same time, as a thorn of alterity, encourage processes of healing.

These two (visual) examples, the Austrian-Italian border (fig. 2–5) and Tristan Poyser's photographic project of the Irish border (fig. 6–7), show that borders do not just denote the »here« and »there« and the »in-between«. Borders themselves (if there is such a thing) are »here«, »there«, and »in-between«. They might be invisible and imagined, yet they have material and visual qualities. They are human-made and often the outcome of power struggles as well as economic interests. They are, to put it bluntly, of this world. At the same time, they are not of this world, they are part of the stories and myths we tell ourselves *about* ourselves. It is exactly this sitting in-between that imbues borders with fascination and power and feeds into identity negotiations and stories of and about communities. This in-between-ness also helps borders to defy critique. It is this religious or mythological understanding of borders, their in-between-ness, the traces of violence and otherness they bear witness to, the thorn of alterity as which they can act, the ruptures in space and time they create, that are all crucial to better understand the dynamic of Europe's internal as well as external borders. As Vincent Della Sala argues, »[t]he creation of a new political space with its own borders requires narratives to give meaning to that space; this new order also implies that the old will be replaced.«[50]

6. Concluding thoughts: Contemporary relevance

»Europe« has been imagined and re-imagined in various ways throughout recent history: as phoenix rising from the ashes of the wars,[51] as a unique project of peace and cooperation, or as a political moloch in pro-Brexit propaganda. In all these visions and imaginings, internal and external borders of the EU (and the Schengen Zone) play a crucial role: some borders must be

49 Sarró 2019, 140.
50 Della Sala 2017, 550.
51 Lacroix/Nicolaïdis 2010, 5.

fortified and others must be levelled. The question of borders is also closely related to the question of how European Union citizens might experience the EU as »their« Union and thus as relevant and »real«. The European Union has woven the idea of freedom of movement into its mythological structure. In a way, EU citizens can experience the Union and the benefits of membership through such freedom of movement and – within the Schengen Zone – without the hassle of border controls. There is a religious element to this understanding of internal and external borders and movement across them, how they are experienced, visualised and become manifest: »religious«, with David Chidester, as that which transcends the everyday and ordinary.

The idea of transcending national borders and the attempt to foster a sense of Europeanness and European togetherness are closely linked to what – in particular in the current political context of increasing political division within as well as outside the EU – must be labelled as a utopian vision of a Europe without borders:

> The suspension of hostile, dividing state borders and the negative impacts they have had on interstate relations is perhaps a uniquely European achievement. For this reason, the European Union's political identity – and indeed its raison d'être – are closely intertwined with the symbolism of transcending and transforming national borders in the interests of integration and peaceful coexistence.[52]

Political divisions in the EU, such as the tensions between Hungary and other EU countries, and the formations of zones, e. g. the idea of multi-speed Europe, show that borders in a borderless Europe, no matter how frictionless and invisible they might become, will continue to matter, ideologically, politically, and in visions of what Europe can or should be.

Birte Wassenberg argues that the so-called Schengen crisis spurred by terrorist attacks in France in 2015 and the migrant crisis did not put an end to the idea of Europe without borders, the freedom of movement of people, capital, services, and goods. Rather, these crises merely brought an end to one particular interpretation of borderless Europe, the myth based on a solely negative interpretation of borders.[53] Wassenberg traces the emergence of

52 Scott 2012, 85.

53 Wassenberg 2020, 31.

that particular myth back to the 1980s when the idea of freedom of movement turned into, as she argues, »the final objective of European integration.«[54] But, Wassenberg notes, »whereas the bordering policies did obstruct the free circulation of people, it did not mean that the borders were closed or that the Schengen Convention was in any way abolished.«[55]

I strongly disagree. On a technical level, Wassenberg might be correct: the re-introduction of border checks did not prevent any EU citizen from exercising their right of free movement. One could say that the border checks were merely an inconvenience people experienced while exercising their rights as EU citizens. Therein, however, lies the crux. In arguing that border policies did not obstruct the free circulation of people, Wassenberg seems to ignore the material, visual, and bodily dimension to how people experience borders, the practice of border crossings, as well as the European Union as institution and their EU citizenship. In that sense, queuing for border checks at formerly abandoned checkpoints are more than a mere inconvenience. Rather, they are the re-introduction of border spectacles that are part of the processes of making borders. These spectacles and the state agents enacting them are not merely inconveniences but have performative character, they create, visualise, and materialise a particular European reality. The idea of Europe without borders might be a myth but the argument for borders equally creates a (counter-)myth:

> The Schengen crisis has therefore proven that the Westphalian border has stayed highly relevant from a security and geopolitical perspective. […] It does not mean that there is no longer an ideal of a »Europe without borders« in terms of the principle of free circulation, but it may lead to the realization that this principle may need restrictions and adaptions at certain times and in exceptional circumstances.[56]

In this paper, I suggested that the interdisciplinary field of border studies benefits from a religious studies approach. By that I do not mean to look at how religious communities and identities are related to borders but at the messy »things« that borders are from a religious studies perspective. Such a

54 Wassenberg 2020, 34.
55 Wassenberg 2020, 33.
56 Wassenberg 2020, 36.

religious studies approach to internal and external EU borders can help us better understand myths and imaginings of Europe, a Europe with borders and a borderless Europe. Exploring the religious dimension of borders, that which lifts borders out of the everyday and the ordinary, can help us to ask questions about who benefits from a borderless or bordered Europe, who are the main political agents and what are their political and economic agendas, and how do people and politicians on the entire political spectrum employ borders, territories, and the experience of borders for their own political and economic gain. Most importantly, such an approach allows us to gain a better understanding of why borders exert such a fascination and political power to this date: not only because they are linked to identity discourses, questions of landownership, and the narratives a people tell themselves about being rooted and connected to their land. Rather, borders impose their power and attract our imagination because they are both: to put it into more biblical language, they are in this world but not of this world. They are human-made but render their createdness invisible. Borders are and create ruptures in space and as such carry a religious dimension. They are a thorn of alterity that sometimes is used and abused for populistic, nationalistic, and right-wing political agendas but can, at the same time, remind us of a painful and violent past and present and thus invite processes of repair and healing. Visualising borders, and border spaces, observing human behaviour in these border spaces, capturing the way borders change over time, or tearing photographs of invisible borders up such as Poyser did, can help to de-mythologise borders and render visible their human createdness.

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