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Accommodating Religious Diversity

Micro-Politics of Spatial Separation in German Refugee Accommodation Centers

Alexander-Kenneth Nagel

Introduction

In early 2017, the world held its breath as US president Donald Trump announced his infamous #muslimban, an executive order which denied immigration to (Muslim) refugees from Syria and citizens of six other predominantly Muslim countries. The year before, at the height of the so-called refugee crisis, several Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia and Hungary, had been deadly serious about not letting Muslim refugees in, pointing to both their own Christian heritage and the lack of preexisting religious infrastructure for Muslims. While this strategic rediscovery of Christian roots in some of the most secularized countries in Europe may appear somehow ironic—or even cynical—it forms part of a broader trend of reemphasizing religious boundaries as collective identity markers (Dahinden/Zittoun 2013). Likewise, the German discussion about refugee accommodation has extensively addressed the risk of interreligious conflicts in refugee camps. Some (of the more conservative) voices argued for a spatial separation along religious lines in order to protect religious minorities, whereas others strongly opposed this religious apartheid model and advocated that refugees had to be able to deal with the realities of a multireligious society from the very beginning. Regardless of the political preference for protection or conviviality, the examples underline the relevance of religious differences in public debates about refugees. At the same time, academic research on the significance and role of religion for refugees is still quite limited. In Germany, recent research endeavors were overshadowed by political discourses about the social and structural integration of refugees,

which has translated into research projects on their participation in the educational system or the labor market (OECD 2017; Schroeder and Seukwa 2017). Other studies are exploring the attitudes and values of or vis-à-vis refugees, often driven by concerns of deviant behavior or radicalization (Feldes et al. 2018; Plener et al. 2017).

In this chapter, I will analyze the handling of religious diversity and practice in German accommodation centers from an institutionalist perspective and with particular emphasis on the material culture of these centers. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a brief overview of the religious patterns of recent refugee immigration to Germany and use the second section to outline my conceptual approach as well as the research design of the project I draw on. In the empirical part of the chapter, I will present results on the religious topographies of accommodation centers, temporary forms of religious space making, such as religious festivals, the micro-politics of separation as well as the memory culture and musealization of the camps themselves. In the fourth and final section, I will draw some conclusions, evaluate my conceptual approach, and explore avenues for further investigation.

Between the years 2014 and 2017, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees registered 1,535,658 first-time applications for asylum. While the figure of 722,370 first-time applications in 2016 marks an annual all-time high in the history of postwar Germany, it must not be forgotten that there have been strong conjunctures of immigration before. After the Second World War, at least twelve million expellees from the former German territories in the East had to find a new home, and between the years 1991 and 1993, more than one million refugees from the Yugoslav Wars applied for asylum in Germany. Recent refugee immigration has also been strongly driven by violent conflicts as a glance at the countries of origin reveals: since 2014, Syria has taken a sad first place with 513,213 applicants, followed by Afghanistan (183,932), Iraq (153,175), Albania (76,523), and Eritrea (53,154). In all of these countries, Muslims form a religious majority (more so in Afghanistan where nine out of ten residents belong to a Sunni tradition and less so in Eritrea and Albania). Although the religious profile of countries of origin can by no means be used as an exact predictor of the religious affiliation of emigrants, the figures suggest that many of the recent refugees belong to some branch of Islam. Between the years 2010 and 2017, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has published data on the religious affiliation of asylum seekers (see Figure 12.1).

Four points can be highlighted: First, ever since 2010, a clear majority of asylum seekers in Germany were Muslims, mainly from the Middle East

Figure 12.1 Religious affiliation of asylum applicants; created by Alexander K. Nagel.

and the Balkans. Second, from 2010 to 2016, the proportion of Muslims has increased from 57 to 73 percent. Third, the high proportion of Muslim immigrants marks a certain change in the religious immigration profile of Germany. Even though there is a history of recruitment contracts with Muslim countries, such as Turkey or Morocco, many of the labor migrants after the Second World War were Christian. Fourth, the relative decline of Christian and Yezidi asylum seekers is due to the high absolute numbers of Syrian applicants since 2014 and hence should not be interpreted as a general trend. The absolute numbers of Yezidi and Christian refugees have, in fact, roughly remained the same.

All in all, these figures point to a shift in the religious profile of refugee immigration to Germany: in a comprehensive study on the living conditions of accepted refugees who arrived between 2008 and 2012, Christians (mainly from Eritrea and Iran) still formed the majority of refugees (37 percent), followed by Yezidis from Iraq (28 percent) and Muslims from Syria and Afghanistan (17 percent). The study also indicated that Christian and Yezidi refugees rated their religiosity higher than Muslim refugees: while four out of five Christians and Yezidis classified their religious beliefs as “very strong” or “rather strong,” the same applies only to one out of two Muslim respondents (Worbs et al. 2016: 209). These results may reflect the specific emigration history of Christians and Yezidis as restricted or even persecuted religious minorities who now make extensive use of their religious freedom. At the same time, they underline that Muslim refugees are not particularly religious as far as they were part of a religious majority in their countries of origin.

Nevertheless, refugee immigration is likely to contribute to a further pluralization of the German religious field and will most likely result in a slightly higher share of the Muslim population. By the end of 2016, the Federal Office for Migration published an estimation of about 4.5 million Muslims in Germany (roughly 5.5 percent of the overall population). Hence, the question comes up whether and how the refugee accommodation system in Germany is equipped to respond to the religious needs of Muslim (and other non-Christian) refugees. On the one hand, the corporatist nature of the German state is based on a benevolent understanding of religious neutrality. Unlike the laicist model in France or the disestablishment model in the United States, the German polity is based on the cooperation between state actors and religious communities as long as they meet certain organizational demands to form a corporation of public law. On the other hand, it is likely that the religious illiteracy of administrators and social service staff may result in a sense of uncertainty and thus translate into a more restrictive policy vis-à-vis non-Christian religious traditions. In the following section, I will further elaborate my research question and the conceptual approach of the chapter.

Religious Diversity and Practice in Refugee Accommodation Centers: Combining Institutional and Material Culture Approaches

As outlined earlier, there has been a close connection between religious conflict in refugee accommodation centers and measures of spatial separation. As a consequence, it seems reasonable to explore the spatial and other material aspects of the organization of refugee accommodation. To this aim, I will combine an institutionalist perspective on religious diversity in public institutions with a material culture approach accounting for the spatial and sensual nature of religious presence in refugee accommodation centers. So far, the sociology of organization has largely neglected the material shape of organizations and focused mainly on artifacts (such as letterheads) as an expression of their corporate identity (Froschauer 2009). Therefore, the chapter can also be read as a test case for the potentials of a material culture perspective for the interpretative study of organizations.

Institutionalist perspective: In recent years, there has been an emerging body of research on religious diversity in various kinds of organizations, such as hospitals, prisons, and the military (Griera and Martínez-Ariño 2014; Roy

and Becci 2015). Earlier approaches envisaged these organizations mainly as a lens to analyze national regimes of religion at work (and hence aimed at a country-comparative perspective), whereas a newer strand of research has complemented this perspective with a focus on the idiosyncratic nature of complex, functional specific organizations, and their creative solutions in dealing with religious diversity. In this vein, scholars have taken an increasing interest in the qualifications and competences which are necessary for a professional perception and handling of religious needs often referred to as “religious literacy” (e.g., Dinham and Francis 2016). While it is not always clear whether religious literacy is restricted to the cognitive dimension of knowledge *about* religion(s) or also extends to informal habitual manners of dealing *with* religious practices or even a positive normative stance *toward* religion, many seem to agree that professionals in different branches of public administration are confronted with their own religious *illiteracy* as the religious field becomes more complex. In some cases, this leads to an *intensified collaboration* with religious or interreligious communities (Griera/Forteza 2011; Koers/Nagel 2018). Another institutional response could be the *restriction* of religious practice and presence. It is likely that the securitization of some religious traditions, such as Islam, may reinforce such a restrictive handling of religion. In this chapter, I analyze the organizational behavior vis-à-vis religion by investigating the experiences and interpretations of the staff of refugee accommodation centers. As a consequence, I will rely on semi-structured interviews with administrators, social workers, and security staff, whereas I will not refer to the perspective of the residents themselves.

Material culture perspective: Political debates about refugees and religion were driven by a strong notion of exclusive spatiality. Nation-states as well as accommodation centers were broadly conceived of as territories which could only bear a limited number or particular kind of religions. Hence, the topic of religious diversity in refugee accommodation centers lends itself to a *spatial analysis* of the religious geographies in which the centers are embedded practices of religious space making as well as micro-politics of conviviality and separation. Drawing on Kim Knott (2008: 1109–10), I aim at understanding the “configuration” of accommodation centers in terms of their extension, that is, the “way in which ‘stratified places’ reveal the traces of earlier times and different ethnic and religious regimes” in a given space, simultaneity, that is, their “synchronic interconnections with other sites” as well as sites of power struggles. Another important facet of material analysis are the *aesthetic formations* of and within refugee accommodation centers. According to Birgit Meyer (2009: 7),

the concept of aesthetic formation refers to “the formative impact of a shared aesthetics though [*sic*] which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things.” While the spatial approach sheds light on the religious topographies in which accommodation centers are situated as well as the micro-politics of separation, the aesthetic approach elucidates the role of sensorial practices and perceptions for religious space making, for example through religious festivals, and for processes of group-related religious or ethnic labeling.

In the following sections, I will make use of these conceptual tools and address the research question “how do refugee accommodation centers deal with religious diversity and practice?” in three operational dimensions: First, I will look at practices of musealization as a mode of reflection on and legitimation of accommodation centers in order to shed light on the temporal dimension of stratified places. Second, I will investigate—what I call—the religious topographies of accommodation centers, for example their spatial relation to sacred sites like churches or chapels, and examine processes of temporary space making in the course of religious festivals and the concerns of the staff to regulate religious “emissions.” Third, I will address the aesthetic implications of labeling and conflict as well as the spatial micro-politics of separation within accommodation centers.

I will draw on empirical data which was gathered in a pilot project on “Religious Diversity and Practice in Refugee Accommodation Centers in Lower Saxony.”¹ At this point, it is also important to note two restrictions in terms of data gathering: First, due to the institutionalist focus, we did not conduct interviews with refugees. As a consequence, we can only observe religious grounds of difference through the eyes of the staff. Second, we did not systematically gather data on material culture (e.g., through images or a thick description of sensual impressions in field notes), but included the spatial and aesthetic dimension as categories of content analysis.

Memory Culture and Musealization: The Border Transit Camp in Friedland

At a first glance, it may seem a bit odd to address the aspect of memory culture in a chapter on how refugee accommodation centers respond to religious diversity. Yet it is only consequential for an institutionalist perspective, which is sensitive to material culture, to treat sites and objects of memory culture as meaningful

part of the organizational environment, which contributes to the legitimacy of an organization. Hence, in line with Kim Knott's suggestions for spatial analysis I look at the memory sites attached to refugee accommodation centers as diachronically "stratified places' (which) reveal the traces of earlier times and different ethnic and religious regimes" (Knott 2008: 1109). I argue that memory culture and musealization are vehicles to frame and administer the history and identity of refugee camps and to renegotiate the national self-understanding of Germany as an immigration country. In the following I will concentrate on the Border Transit Camp in Friedland and consider both objects of memory culture within the camp, a museum which is locally and topically directly attached to the camp and a huge monument ("*Heimkehrerdenkmal*") as part of the memory culture of both the camp and the village as a whole (Baur 2014).

There are numerous objects and sites of memory culture on the camp territory or in its direct neighborhood: in the center of the camp, right in front of the dining hall, one of the original houses, a so-called Nissen hut, has been preserved. A small museum in itself, the hut contained some of the original furniture and was supposed to illustrate how life in the camp was like "back then." Other important sites of memory culture are the Lutheran Camp Chapel as well as the Friedland Bell (see Figures 12.2 and 12.3). The camp chapel has been an integral part of the camp since its inauguration in 1949 and is widely regarded as part of the "tradition" of the camp. At the same time, it is still in use and equipped with half a chaplain position. The "camp pastor" offers counseling which is not restricted to Protestants or even Christians and holds regular worship services. Furthermore, the chapel is used by Mennonite preachers and Brethren Congregations, who address the spiritual needs of many ethnic German immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Last, but not least, the Friedland Bell constitutes one of the most powerful objects of memory culture on the campground. The iron bell which weighs 700 kilograms was donated to the camp in 1949 by German expellees and was rung not only for services in the camp chapel but also to greet soldiers who were returning from war captivity between 1953 and 1956. The bell quickly turned into a central symbol for the camp and the German postwar history of expulsion and became an important focus of various practices of place making (Schießl 2016: 288–9). Not only was it sent on a journey throughout Germany to be rung at commemoration meetings of expellees, but its sound was broadcasted via radio and the organist of the camp chapel composed a song for the bell which called for the return of German war prisoners and settlers from the Soviet territories ("*ruft die Friedlandglocke in die Welt hinaus / Laßt die deutschen Brüder heim ins Vaterhaus*"; see Schießl 2016: 290).

Figure 12.2 Lutheran “Camp Chapel”; photo by Alexander K. Nagel.

As a matter of fact, the symbolic weight of the Friedland Bell is also palpable in the Museum Friedland, which was opened in 2016 and pays audiovisual homage to the bell in numerous pictures and video installations (see Figure 12.4)

According to its mission statement, the “Museum Friedland explores, secures, presents and conveys the past and present of Friedland Transit Camp. In addition, it focuses on the complex processes of farewell, arrival and new beginnings in general, as well as various aspects of migration policy, social participation, borders, identities and affiliations, consequences of war, human rights and asylum, both in the historical and contemporary perspective.”²

The multilayered statement expresses the intention to expand the boundaries of memory culture in Friedland beyond the postwar history of expulsion and

Figure 12.3 Vista from Friedland Bell to St. Norbert Church; photo by Alexander K. Nagel.

resettlement and to reframe the camp as well as the village as landmarks of immigration and multiculturalism. The permanent exhibition starts with the postwar history of the camp in the first floor and traces the more recent stages of the German immigration history in the second floor (e.g., Vietnamese “boat people” and political refugees from Chile).³ Given the strong connection to the Border Transit Camp which takes form in a “Museum Trail,” a tour through the premises of the camp by a former resident, the museum has to perform a balancing act between embracing the powerful *spiritus loci* of the camp with its heavy and sometimes reactionary connotations of “liberation” and carefully redefining it based on tropes of a new beginning and the immigration society as an inclusive and participatory project.

Figure 12.4 Video installation of the Friedland Bell; photo by Alexander K. Nagel.

To make the memory cultural ensemble even more complex, the Association of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*) has erected a huge memorial site on an elevation close to the Border Transit Camp (see Figure 12.5). The memorial consists of four winglike concrete gates of 28 meters and can be seen from afar (e.g., the nearby highway) due to its monumentality and elevated location. In the interpretation of the Association of Expellees, the gates represent “gates to freedom” and thus tie in with the discourse of liberation which is connected to the postwar history of the camp. Attached to the gates there are twelve panels indicating the origin of the memorial (“In 1967 expellees established this memorial”) and meticulously accounting for the (German) victims of the Second World War. In one gate, there is embedded a bell which resembles the original Friedland Bell (Schwelling 2008: 201).⁴

Figure 12.5 Memorial of expellees (Heimkehrerdenkmal); photo by Thorbjørn at German Wikipedia (CC BY-SA 3.0).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe the memory cultural ensemble in more detail. Without doubt, the high density of memory cultural sites and approaches in Friedland is peculiar and corresponds to the “symbolic loading of the location of Friedland as ‘emotional space,’ ‘area of security and comfort’ and ‘homeland myth’” (Schwelling 2008: 193, translation AKN). However, we can see similar attempts of musealizing and cultivating histories of immigration in other contexts, too, for example, an exhibition entitled “On the run” (*Auf der Flucht*) at the reception center in Braunschweig based on photographs by UNHCR staff and journalists,⁵ or a memorial site at the former refugee reception center in Marienfelde.⁶ In both cases, the “authentic location” is used as an argument to advertise the exhibition which underlines the complex nature of refugee accommodation centers as “stratified places” as indicated by Kim Knott and shows that “traces of earlier times” are not just present in a sense of archaeological sediments, but are carefully curated in order to craft actual discourses about immigration. Furthermore, the example of the Friedland Bell illustrates the prominence of aesthetic formations in the cultivation of national memories of immigration as visual, haptic, and auditive impressions are blended together to purport the myth of the Border Transit Camp.

Religious Topographies of Refugee Accommodation Centers

The spatial arrangements and context of accommodation centers are closely associated with their handling of religious diversity and practice. First of all, this refers to the *premises* of the centers themselves. Some of the centers in the sample were just larger single buildings with a limited area for communal use around them. In particular this holds true for smaller emergency shelters, which were established in school buildings or hotels, and municipal accommodation centers. In contrast, many of the state reception centers are designed to host more than 1,000 residents and therefore often consist of a number of different buildings. For example, the state reception center in Braunschweig encompasses six houses on 64,000 square meters and has a regular capacity of 973 beds. Likewise, the Border Transit Camp in Friedland has a regular capacity of 820 beds which are distributed over twelve houses (see below for an illustration). Both centers accommodate refugees in bedrooms with two to six beds. Despite their similarities, the centers differ significantly in their overall location and environment: while the first is located at the Northern rim of Braunschweig, a multicultural city with almost 250,000 residents, the latter is part of the village of Friedland with about 1,300 residents.

Apart from its edificial structure, the spatial *context* of an accommodation center strongly determines its religious geography. While Braunschweig has six (mainly Turkish) mosques which can be reached by bike in less than half an hour, residents in Friedland have to travel 14 kilometers to Göttingen in order to find a mosque. At the same time, the Border Transit Camp itself exhibits a variety of religious sites, as Figure 12.6 shows.

Figure 12.6 is an outtake of the official sitemap which shows the eastern part of the camp with quarters (blue), the dining hall (orange), and a couple of public buildings (green). Among the public buildings, there is—what I call—the *Spiritual Triangle*, which connects the three main religious sites of the camp, namely, the Roman Catholic St. Norbert Church (Figure 12.7), the Lutheran Camp Chapel (Figure 12.2), and the Friedland Bell (see Figure 12.3). As pointed out in the previous section, the bell is an integral part of the memory culture and musealization of the camp. Originally, it was part of the camp chapel and rung for the return of German postwar soldiers (*Heimkehrer*) in the early 1950s. Since 1970, the bell is attached to a steel frame which is marked by a prominent yellow cross. The Catholic Church is not situated at the campground, but in its direct neighborhood and supposed to cater the spiritual needs of villagers as well as camp residents. To reach out to the latter, the parish employs an

Figure 12.6 Sitemap of the Border Transit Camp, Friedland.

Arab-speaking deacon who has become an important contact person for many Syrian and Iraqi refugees, regardless of their faith. Last, but not least, the camp chapel is situated on the premises of the camp itself and exclusively directed to its residents.

Whereas the prominent Christian infrastructure in Friedland is a result of the specific history of the Border Transit Camp (see previous section), it is remarkable since almost all directors of state accommodation centers in our sample have emphasized a restrictive notion of religious neutrality as a basic principle of their work. In most cases, religious neutrality meant that collective and visible forms of religious practice (such as the Muslim Jumu'ah prayer) were not allowed on the public premises of the center (in contrast to private religious practice within the rooms). While most centers would not offer religious facilities

Figure 12.7 Roman Catholic Church St. Norbert; photo by Alexander K. Nagel.

like prayer rooms, the staff referred non-Christian (mostly Muslim and Yezidi) refugees to mosques or community houses in the neighborhood. Several social workers mentioned that they had a list with addresses of mosques and other (mostly religious) migrant self-organizations which they would share with residents upon request. In two cases, the staff mentioned that they had consulted with intelligence authorities (*Staatsschutz*) about which mosques to include in the list. This points to a high degree of uncertainty vis-à-vis Muslim actors and the prevalence of a discourse of securitization which responds to an increased public awareness for Islamic radicalization.

The spiritual triangle in Friedland is an obvious example that the restrictive notion of religious neutrality was not consistently applied. At the same time, the prominent Christian presence through churches, confessional welfare

associations and Christian volunteers was to be found elsewhere, too. For example, some directors of emergency shelters were referring to a close exchange with neighboring churches and the state accommodation center in Oldenburg is situated in an old monastery. Social workers and church representatives underlined that Muslim refugees should feel invited to make use of the church or chapel for a moment of silent prayer or contemplation. In Friedland, it was reported that the Roman Catholic Sunday service was frequently attended by Muslim refugees as the deacon provided Arab translation. At the same time, one interview partner suggested that plans by local Muslims to build a small mosque or hold a public prayer in the village had faced severe and fundamental opposition. As a consequence, Muslim residents in Friedland were supposed to travel to nearby Göttingen in order to visit a mosque, although they had no money to purchase the train ticket.⁷

There are more examples to show how the restrictive understanding of religious neutrality was contested from many sides: First, some centers would register the religious affiliation of their residents even though it was not supposed to play a role for their accommodation. Second, all centers sought to provide “halal” food. Some externalized the responsibility by relying on the “halal” designation by external caterers and some just did not offer pork products. Third, many centers and emergency shelters collaborated closely with Christian parishes (both mainline and evangelical) to organize additional activities for the residents, such as sports, handicrafts, and preliminary German classes. Fourth, many of our respondents reported extensive missionary activism by Jehovah’s Witnesses, which they regarded as inappropriate and therefore sought to prevent as far as possible. Despite widespread concerns of the staff about Islamist indoctrination and intensive information and training campaigns on Islamism and political extremism, none of our interview partners had recognized any Muslim *da’wa* activities.

Another form of religious presence which undermines the restrictive notion of religious neutrality is the *celebration of religious festivals*, such as Ramadan and Christmas. Unlike worship sites, these festivals can be regarded as *temporary instances of religious space making* within the centers. It is remarkable that almost all accommodation centers and emergency shelters in the sample have celebrated Ramadan and Christmas in a collective and public fashion. Ramadan was mainly perceived as a challenge in terms of gastronomic logistics since food had to be supplied at unusual times. In many cases, the staff handed out food bags and thus turned the (otherwise inherently public) act of eating into a private matter. More significantly, some centers organized—

or allowed for—feasts for Iftar (breaking the fast) or Eid al-Fitr. Some staff members indicated that they enjoyed what they perceived as “reverse hospitality” which allowed the residents to “give something back.” This notion elucidates the usual role division between active and powerful professionals and passive and receptive residents which is temporarily being inverted in an almost carnevalesque fashion.

In another case, nocturnal Iftar celebrations led to trouble with neighbors outside the center who complained to the local authorities about the nighttime disturbance. A staff member gladly reported the decision of the municipality: “They (the municipality, AKN) have backed us up. [. . .] We cannot deny that to anyone. It is their right (*gutes Recht*), it is in the constitution and this is how it is done” (translation AKN). Two things are interesting here: first, the juggling with personal pronouns, in relation to the municipality refugees and staff form a common entity (“*they* have backed *us* up”), whereas the residents as claimants of their constitutional right form a “they” which is distinct from this collective “we”; second, there is no doubt whatsoever that Iftar and Ramadan are protected by the basic right to religious freedom and Muslims must be allowed to exercise their religion.

This latter aspect is particularly relevant in comparison to Christmas celebrations in accommodation centers. Some of our interview partners talked about initial hesitations, as they did not want to overwhelm the (mostly non-Christian) residents with Christian symbols. Most of these considerations have started with a very practical question: (Where) should we put up a Christmas tree? To augur the result, trees were put up in almost all centers in the sample, based on three main justifications. Some argued that they had to put a tree because of external pressures, be it the spiritual desires of volunteers or the need to display the Christian profile of the welfare association which was running the center. Others held that they had talked to the residents about their hesitations “and they did not mind” since they were “guests in this country.” The most interesting justification, however, was to redefine Christmas as an event which (unlike Ramadan) is rather “cultural” than “religious.” Following this line of reasoning, putting up a tree and other Christmas activities can be perceived as vehicles of cultural transfer and integration (“*Kulturtransport*”) rather than expressions of a distinct religion. Likewise, the main argument for the Lutheran chapel in the Border Transit Camp in Friedland was that it had become part of the “tradition” of the camp.

In order to understand the specific modes of Ramadan and Christmas as incidents of religious space making within the centers, it is helpful to take a

look at the *aesthetic formations* associated with these events. Quite clearly, the aesthetic formation of Ramadan was connected to sensual experiences of *commensality* during Iftar. Eating together became a medium to alleviate the strict role division between residents and staff members. In a similar vein, the neighbors who were complaining to the municipality were apparently disturbed in a very sensual way by the (auditive and olfactory) emissions of the feast. Hence, in my working understanding, *religious emissions* are sensual expressions of religious objects or practices which impose themselves on actors to a certain degree. In this regard, Advent and Christmas practices in the centers also had a strong sensual impact. Apart from Christmas trees, they comprised leisure activities for children, such as baking, storytelling, and handicraft works. Many centers also distributed Christmas gifts which were donated by external partners from local companies or parishes. These activities add up to a dense, tangible, and multisensory presence of Christmas in many centers which created an atmosphere that is hard to elude. As a consequence, some staff members sought to prevent Christian overwhelming through what could be called practices of *religious emission control*, for example, a Christmas tree is removed from the foyer to the staff room and gifts are distributed deliberately without any narrative connection to Christmas. In the following section, I will further follow the trail of spatial politics and aesthetic formations and take a look at the perception, solution, and prevention of interreligious and intercultural conflicts in the centers.

Interreligious Conflict and the Micro-politics of Separation

As I mentioned earlier, interreligious conflicts used to be a major issue in the German media at the climax of the so-called refugee crisis between 2015 and 2016. Most of these reports focused on assaults by Muslim residents or security staff (e.g., guards within the centers employed by private security companies) on Christian and Yezidi refugees. In one case, a mass riot was supposed to have started over someone ripping pages out of a Quran.⁸ The evangelical platform OpenDoors has published a number of reports on the “Lack of protection for religious minorities [. . .] in German refugee shelters.”⁹ The reports, which faced severe criticism for shortcomings in methodology and empirical analysis, drew on a sample of Christian (and some Yezidi) refugees who had made use of an emergency hotline for persecuted Christians, offered by the Council of Oriental Christians in Germany. They suggested that assaults on Christian and Yezidi

refugees by Muslim refugees and security staff were frequent and substantial—and called for separate accommodation. In contrast, a position paper by the German Institute for Human Rights (mainly based on investigations by the Christian mainline churches) concluded that “there is no systematic discrimination for religious reasons to be determined in refugee accommodation centers, neither through security staff nor through refugees themselves” (DIM 2016: 2).

These accounts show that the issue of interreligious conflicts in accommodation centers is highly contested which makes empirical investigation on the matter very difficult. This being said, it does not come as a surprise that the staff members in our sample almost unanimously denied the prevalence of group-related interreligious tensions or conflicts. Instead, they pointed to the liminal and existential situation of the refugees which could trigger personal animosities as the following quotation by a social worker from a Christian welfare association illustrates:

We did have conflicts, but this was really marginal. There is a lot of talk about minorities, Christians, persecution and mobbing of Christians and so on. It's actually not true. [...] We have had mobbing for completely other reasons. And once again: when you put 250 or 300 people in a small spot who have different opinions (“*Ansichten*”) or so, then this will just lead to discussions, quarrel. (Translation by author)

The quotation indicates that staff members are well aware of the political discourse and do not want to nourish it any further.¹⁰ Instead of (group-related) “conflicts,” the respondent prefers to speak of (individual) “mobbing.” Variations of this guiding motif could be found in almost all centers in the sample. The striking similarity between the statements suggests that they are not (only) meant to be answers to our question, but (also) a generalized apologetic response to an overarching discourse. It is perhaps not surprising that distinct incidents of conflict were mainly reported by the security staff. For instance, a policeman who was responsible for a big state reception center mentioned an assault by (Muslim) refugees from Northern Africa on (Christian) refugees from Eritrea:

So, the Eritreans were easy to be recognized for all as they had the darkest skin, and evidently in the Arab World this is already a reason to say: “this one is below me, I am the better human being,” this was my impression. And they took them to terms one by one, beat them and cut the cross from their neck and said: “next time I will cut your throat.”

This example shows how racist and religious dimensions of conflict may be intertwined. According to the respondent, the perpetrators started the quarrel

because they felt racially superior to the Eritreans, whereas the violent incidents around the cross point to a religious dimension. The quotation also indicates how cultural stereotypes may shape the definition of a situation by the staff and thus inform organizational behavior: the essentialist reference to “the Arab World” is part of a wider polemic pattern against refugees from Northern Africa whom the interview partner regards as “notorious criminals.”

All in all, such polemics were rare in the sample; however, many of our respondents referred to *culturalist stereotypes*, mainly based on essentialist notions of nationality or ethnicity. As a matter of fact, normative evaluations by the staff are both relevant insights (as far as the “logic” of the organization is concerned) and a methodological challenge (as far as understanding the nature of conflicts is concerned). In this vein, the policemen noted that he had only become aware of intrareligious tensions between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims through an interpreter. On the one hand, this is an interesting example of how religious illiteracy works within the centers, and in some cases, such kind of ignorance can even be an advantage as it prevents certain conflicts from becoming salient. On the other hand, it underlines that in the actual research design we can only perceive conflicts through the eye of the professionals, including their blind spots and biases.

It is no wonder that the police officer quoted earlier draws a connection between the (alleged) visual recognizability of the Eritreans and their vulnerability. In many cases, conflicts (and their perception in terms of culturalist stereotypes) were closely associated with particular *aesthetic formations*. A speaking example for this can be found in the following vignette on tensions between Afghan and Pakistani refugees, which was told by social workers from a municipal accommodation center:

In the beginning there was nothing but ignorance, they did not even greet each other when they passed by, but sought for as much distance as possible [...] in order not to touch each other. Cooking together did not work out at all, therefore separate kitchen containers were provided, one for the Afghans and one for the Pakistanis, since they even did not want to cook next to each other. And the main reason was that the Afghans said that the Pakistanis smelled bad. Because they use other spices than the Afghans and that is very . . . a very intensive smell. It did smell when you got into the compartments, that is: the sleeping compartments. That is different. And they also did not care for hygiene as much as the Afghans or like you know it from us Germans, but dishes were not cleaned and only put into the corner just to fill it with another portion of soup. And that they sat on the ground to eat, the Pakistanis, that is; the Afghans have started

to sit at the table, were interested: how do I eat with knife and fork? May I eat with my mouth full? Which is so important for us Europeans, a bit like Knigge (classical German etiquette guide, AKN), yes, they really found it interesting how we do this. But the Pakistanis did not care for that at all.

I present the quotation in full length because it elucidates paradigmatically how culturalist stereotypes are being formed based on aesthetic formations and translate into organizational behavior. In the first part of the sequence, the social worker reports about animosities between refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan, which led them to provide separate kitchen containers (and bathrooms). In the second part, he elaborates on the “reasons” for these animosities and comes up with two explanations: first, he refers to the (emic) explanation that the Afghans claimed the Pakistanis smelled bad which is combined with an (etic) confirmation: they do indeed smell “intensive” as they use “other spices.” Second, he infers from different notions of hygiene to a more general difference in mentality: whereas “the Afghans” are more European and show an eagerness to adopt German eating habits, “the Pakistanis” are portrayed as dirty and ignorant vis-à-vis the culture of the host society. While in the first part, both Afghans and Pakistanis are collectively referred to as “they” (in opposition to the German/European “we”), there is a strong paternalistic narrative emerging in the latter part which polemically contrasts the “Afghan” attempts to integrate (i.e., to do as the Germans do) with “Pakistani” ignorance. The example points to a number of relevant mechanisms of conflict perception and solution: first, incidents of uneasiness or conflict are perceived or reported; second, groups are being labeled based on their (alleged) olfactory emissions; and third, measures of spatial separation are applied in order to solve the conflict.

As a matter of fact, separation was the most important means to solve or prevent conflicts. For analytical reasons, three aspects of separation can be distinguished: First, the reception authority of Lower Saxony (*Landesaufnahmebehörde*) partly allocated refugees to different state accommodation centers based on their country of origin, but not on religious grounds. However, as a spokesperson of the reception authority highlighted, the basic idea was to “create heterogeneity.” Second, there is what I call the *spatial micro-politics* within the reception centers. While there was hardly any separation reported on religious grounds, separate accommodation based on matters of not only personal vulnerability (e.g., women and children) but also ethnic or national criteria, turned out to be quite frequent. In some cases, separation was a reaction to incidents of conflict; in other cases, it was used as a preventive measure.

Decisions about separate accommodation have to maneuver between who should be separated from whom and the given physical conditions and restraints of “separability.” The most widespread spatial units of separation were chambers, floors, and houses, whereas frequently separated parties included Afghans and Pakistanis, refugees from Iraq and Iran, as well as Northern Africa and Eritrea. Third, there is what I call “separatory interventions,” that is, situative practices of separation in order to solve a particular problem. For instance, emergency shelters sometimes solved personal (including marital) disputes by temporarily sending one party to another shelter. In another case, metal fences were put up to avoid quarrel in the food queue, a notorious site of trouble.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I combined institutionalist and material culture approaches in order to account for the management of religious diversity in German refugee accommodation centers. It soon became clear that material aspects of religion, such as religious geographies, processes of religious space making and aesthetic formations associated with religious celebrations or other public forms of religious practice correspond with organizational behavior in many different ways.

First, and quite obvious, as the separation of groups and individuals turned out to be an important measure of conflict resolution and prevention, the physical structure of the premises of a center opens up certain options of “separability” and delimits other ones. In this sense, it does make a difference, if 800 refugees are situated in a former barracks building (one house, two floors) or in twenty separate huts. Furthermore, there was evidence that the (lack of) religious literacy of the staff turned out to be crucial for an interreligious reading of personal or group-related conflict. To put it into a nutshell: the organization can only address conflict lines which their staff is able to perceive. In this sense, religious illiteracy may be thought of as an advantage as far as it prevents interreligious conflicts from becoming salient. At the same time, however, it is highly problematic as far as it fosters a hegemonial understanding of religious neutrality.

Second, refugee accommodation centers exhibit and are embedded in religious geographies of their own kind. Despite the restrictive reading of a doctrine of religious neutrality which banned all forms of religious presence from the public and confined it to the “private” (as little privacy as there is), many accommodation facilities had a church or chapel at their doorstep or even on their grounds. The same applied to Christian welfare associations, such as Diakonie and Caritas (the

two biggest faith-based welfare associations in Germany), which run a number of accommodation centers and maintain clothing counters and helpdesks in many others. This strong and institutionalized Christian presence suggests that the restrictive stance toward religious neutrality is hegemonial in the sense that it privileges Christian actors as part of the “tradition” of a center and purports a religious geography with Christianity in the center and other religious traditions (namely Islam) at the margins.

Third, the relationship between materiality and organizational behavior cannot be reduced to the simple formula “Being determines Consciousness.” Instead, we see various forms of religious space making, often connected to particular aesthetic formations. Although the public practice of religious rituals was prohibited in all accommodation centers in the sample, festivals such as Christmas and Ramadan were widely celebrated. Visible symbols like Christmas trees, auditive signs like the sound of Christmas songs or the joyful noise of an Iftar feast, haptic experiences like in distributing and unwrapping a gift and olfactory stimuli like the smell of freshly baked biscuits or a barbeque after sunset, all amount to peculiar aesthetic formations which are closely connected to social dynamics of commensality and community. At the same time, it is a characteristic of these—what I call—“religious emissions” that they are hard to avoid and can manifest the presence of a religious “other,” which may trigger conflict or at least complaints by the neighbors.

Fourth, apart from spatial figurations and religious space making through aesthetic formations, I have shown that accommodation centers are stratified spaces in which broader national debates on immigration, hospitality, and multiculturalism crystallize. As a matter of fact, the different strata of meaning do not speak for themselves but are subject to active reinterpretation and renegotiation through musealization and other memory culture practices. Thus, museums, exhibitions, memorials, and guided tours serve as vehicles of administering the “tradition” of accommodation centers and to break up—or purport—its hegemonic implications in terms of religion.

While the chapter sets out to advertise the capacity of institutionalist and material approaches to jointly offer new insights on religious diversity and practice in refugee accommodation centers, it points to a number of *gaps and avenues for future research*. First of all, it seems crucial to include the perspective of the refugees themselves and their perceptions of multireligious figurations within the material culture of the centers. Furthermore, it is desirable to implement some generically “material” approaches on the level of data collection of analysis, that is, a thick documentation of spatial and aesthetic dimensions of refugee accommodation.