Interview with Dr. Verena Meyer – By Merel Vlak

05-02-2024

Verena, thank you ever so much for doing this interview. I want to start by asking about your 'religious studies' journey. You're originally from Germany, and you went to university there?

Yes, I grew up in a small town in Germany and in a way my whole journey was aimed at getting as far away from that small town in Germany as possible. I came to Religious Studies by way of Indonesian Studies. I chose this program pretty much at random. I knew I wanted to study Philosophy, but then one of the available minors was Southeast Asian Studies. I knew nothing about Southeast Asia, but I reckoned: Well, that's suitably far away. Let's study it.

The other side of the globe… Should be far enough!

Yes, exactly. Then I ended up studying a year abroad in Jakarta at a small institution for philosophy while living in a boarding house with five Muslim girls from Central Java. And I think at that point I came to realize that it wasn't quite philosophy that I was studying about Indonesia, but it was religion, since whenever I studied philosophy, the questions that I was most drawn to were those that went beyond reason and rationality. I figured that probably meant that I should be studying religion and not philosophy.

You did your PhD at Columbia University, New York. What was your experience there?

Yeah, it was great. I was in the Islamic studies department, which meant that I had to go through the same training as everybody else, with classical Islamic philosophy. But like almost all Islamic studies programs, it was very, very Middle East-focused, right? In the Islamic studies program, I was the only person who was not focusing on the Middle East. In a way that makes you feel like you're the weirdest pony in the circus. But this classical training in Islam has helped me a lot in really understanding Southeast Asian Islam as Islamic, how Muslims in Southeast Asia draw on their heritage, and how they participate in the Muslim world.

What type of research did you do for your PhD?

I could never quite decide if I wanted to do ethnographic research or more textual literary research, so I ended up doing both. Why not? I think as my advisor was an ethnographer, I was heading more in the direction of anthropology. Then something happened that at the time seemed like a great disaster, but turned out quite fortunate… I had this one year to do research in Indonesia and then I would be on the clock. I had to finish up. I had my research grant, and I was ready to go, but then my Indonesian research visa did not go through. The process took forever… Then August came, and I had no idea where I was headed. However, I had a standing invitation to join a research group on Javanese literature in Jerusalem, so I just went there

instead and got into the field of Javanese literature, which really enriched my dissertation. I think the result would have been a lot less interesting if I hadn't done the Javanese literary research, in addition to all the classical Arabic sources. Eventually, my research visa did go through, and I ended up doing a third of the year in Jerusalem, and two-thirds in Indonesia.

Then you spend a year in Norway, doing a post-doc, before being hired here at Leiden University. When did you arrive here, and what has your experience been so far?

Well, I started officially on December 1st, but unofficially I've been around much longer because I was able to finish up the last semester of my Norwegian post-doc remotely. Generally, I love it here. I love the library. The library is just heaven for somebody in my field. Anything I've ever looked for was just right here and I got it within 15 minutes. Another thing that I like about my position here is that it is both in Southeast Asia studies and religious studies. In all other positions that I've ever been in, it always felt like I had to choose between the two. You either have conversation partners for religious studies or Islamic studies, or you'll have conversation partners for Southeast Asian studies. Here, that is not the case.

Let's talk some more about the course you're going to be teaching soon: Islam in and South and Southeast Asia. What subjects are you going to be discussing? Is it going to be primarily about Indonesia or are you going to explore other regions?

It's going to be pretty broad, yeah. It's going to be both the Malay-Indonesian world primarily, but then also looking at Islamic minorities in other Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, and then of course South Asia, which includes India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. It's going to be broadly historical in the sense that we're going to begin with how the area was gradually converted. But we are not only going to look at historical sources. We'll always look at how the memory of historical events shapes contemporary movements and contemporary self-understanding of Muslims in South and Southeast Asia. Obviously, we'll read various academic sources, but we'll also watch films and look at memes. So, I think we are going to have fun.

Could you perhaps share some more about the similarities and differences between Islam in Indonesia and other parts of the world?

In former times, Islam in Indonesia was always conceptualized as syncretism, right? This was one of the impacts of (Dutch) Orientalist scholarship, which described Indonesian Islam as barely Islamic. There was this narrative of the thin veneer of Islam on top of this substratum of animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, that they weren't truly Islamic. It was said that they're doing things differently from the way they do it in the Middle East. There are certain cultural aspects that they are integrating into Islam. They have the wayang and the gamelan and certain rituals. They implied that the Indonesian Muslims were kind of Muslim, but also kind of not.

When we say that, we're implying that there is a "pure Islam" in the Middle East, while Middle Eastern Islam is also influenced by various cultural things. That impacted Muslim self-perceptions. I like to call this colonial gaslighting or academic gaslighting, to tell somebody they're not what they say they are because they're not doing it "the right way". Who are we to tell anybody what they're doing right or wrong? And I think that even today, this is impacting Muslim self-perceptions in Southeast Asia creating this anxiety of: "Are we good enough?" "Are we Muslim enough?"

Is there anything you can say about the Islamophobia that countries are facing and the impact that Islamophobia has on Muslims?

The Muslims I've talked to are very adamant about emphasizing to me, that "We're not radicals." "We're moderates." "We're very friendly with other religions." It's almost like a knee-jerk reaction. There are just these immense pressures on Muslims to be quote-unquote good Muslims or moderate Muslims... One thing that I have noticed is that a lot of the time when Muslims articulate in what way they are moderate, they make use of very Islamophobic language or imagery to distinguish themselves from other Muslims.

Sometimes, to avoid discrimination, they like to play by the rules of some sort of imagined ideal from the West, of what a Muslim is supposed to be. Take for example Muslims at Western universities and drinking culture. I don't quite know what it's like in the Netherlands, but in the U S you kind of need to participate in drinking to be part of the community. A lot of Muslims have the choice of either not drinking, and then immediately being ostracized because they're considered weird, or oppressed - or they participate and give up on their ideals. So sometimes it seems like there is no good option there.

It sounds like it's an impossible situation, but I also see people navigating it very gracefully and very creatively. One thing that I love about Indonesians is that they're always joking. I remember one time I was in Indonesia and I was visiting another white guy who was doing research in the same city. We were going to have dinner together and I wanted to buy a bottle of wine to bring. I was with a Muslim friend when I got the wine and the whole situation just felt a bit absurd. She was uncomfortable, and I felt sorry about it, but we just started joking about the situation, because we both knew that if we joked about it, then we could express the fact that it was uncomfortable, but it didn't have to be a huge issue. As we walked, she was just joking the whole time about how she didn't want to walk with me because I was carrying this haram thing! Humour, I think, is one of the best ways in which a lot of Indonesian Muslims that I know have navigated these sensitive topics.

You mentioned the contemporary field of Islam in South and Southeast Asia, which is quite an interesting topic right now, with a lot happening.

There was the burning of sex toys of tourists, in Bali, for example. Could you tell me more about what is happening there right now?

That's a really good question. I mean, we're often thinking about the last couple of decades as a conservative turn, or in other words, that Indonesian Muslims are becoming increasingly conservative, becoming increasingly radical. And in one sense, it's certainly true that there are conservative movements. However, it is important to keep in mind that this is the kind of topic that makes for good headlines. So, on the one hand, yes, it's true that this is happening. On the other hand, there's also a huge resistance movement and a lot of people trying to articulate how this is not what they think Islam is about. And I think that has become livelier at the same rate as the Islamists have become livelier.

You're currently writing a book with the working title "Futures Past, The Politics of Memory in Islamic Java". Can you tell us some more about that?

I'm currently reconsidering the title since it's not just about the politics. I think there can be a bit of a danger when we bring religion into close association with politics. We'll have to see about that... But the basic ideas of the book are about the construction of identity and how these constructions of identity are used. I will also be specifically looking at the driving force of memory; how we remember our shared past and how that can bring people together, and how we articulate who we are as a community by referring to our ancestors. So, what I'll be showing is how traditionalists and modernists have different meanings and purposes for memory. These meanings and purposes of memory are not static but are used in different ways at different moments. For example, modernists, are self-conscious about remembering. They are very proud of the fact that they are oriented toward the future and not oriented toward the past. And yet they do point out that they have been around since 1912, that they have this long history and that they have done a lot of good deeds for Indonesia, like building hospitals. But then again, they don't want to celebrate the past too much because that's kind of inimical to what they are about as an organization.

This modernist movement, how did it start? What was the incentive?

There was a broad movement of Islamic revival in the whole world. Mecca and Medina, and also in Egypt, were some of the nodes where a lot of people were teaching different ideas about renewal. This spread throughout the Islamic world. The modernist movement in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah, was founded in 1912, by Ahmad Dahlan (1868-1923), and is all about renewal. They want to be oriented toward the future. Look ahead. Therefore, when modernists complain about traditionalists, it's always regarding the traditionalist tendency to "look back" and do what figures of the past tell them to do. Nevertheless, there is more to it there, since modernists do talk about their founder, his greatness, and his example. The founder has become normative, but he can't be so in a straightforward way.

So, this creates tension. I think it's a pretty productive tension in the sense that it's not just an impasse. It's not just a dead end. Within this tension, a lot of really interesting things are happening. It's what I've been writing about this morning … There are ideas about renewal, and how Islam has to be renewed all the time. Yet, there is this long trajectory of other renewals that have happened in the past, which have become the "how to" of the renewals of today. But for a renewal to be a renewal, the old renewals have to be completely stripped of their contents. This whole pastness of the past must be erased, to actualize it again in the present, which may look completely different. Nevertheless, you're still putting yourself into this lineage of reformers.

So it's a retrospective way of looking at the past and framing the past into the present.

Yes, exactly. I'll give you one example that I think is interesting. One of the most cherished memories about the founder of Muhammadiyah, Ahmad Dahlan, is that as he was passing away, he told his friends and his family members: "I am entrusting Muhammadiyah to you, so you will develop it forever." This shows how the memory of him is almost self-undermining. He is a normative example. But what we're remembering about him is his call for change.

And in your book, are you also looking at perhaps a traditionalist or people in between the grey area?

There is a big grey area, but what I'm looking at mostly is how traditionalism and modernism are constructed. There is also some interesting stuff going on with memory among traditionalists in particular. When we think of memory, we often think of it as a thing that is happening in our heads. It's something that maybe we can share, but it is essentially a cognitive process. It's not something that impacts the world other than what it might do with us. It might motivate or encourage us, but for my traditionalist interlocutors, memory is something very alive. It's a force, a power of its own. And if you remember, you activate this force that is very real and out there and that can do things to you. It's not you. It's something else that is acting upon you and others. One of the ways in which traditionalists remember is by going to graves and saying a prayer, remembering this particular person and their virtues and their knowledge. Let me give you one example. This is a story that I heard at a traditionalist boarding school… One particular girl became a victim of black magic. She was sitting on a bus and a guy approached her, made some very inappropriate comments, and then gave her a piece of paper with his phone number on it. She took the piece of paper, but little did she know that he had cast a spell on it that made her sexually submissive to him. It's a terrible story, actually… This went on for some time, but one day she went to the grave of a particular figure. She didn't go with any agenda, because the spell was just too strong. But she went, and she remembered this buried person, she prayed, and as she got up, the piece of paper fell out of her pocket,

which broke the spell. Something else, or the power of memory, acted upon her. It physically made that paper fall out of her pocket, breaking the spell, and setting her free.

An important thing to add, regarding memory, is that it allows us to look at both politics and religion. We can see that we're remembering certain things and narrating them and curating them strategically, to present as a certain kind of Muslim and to get access to certain kinds of things. So that's one aspect, but I think the other aspect is, and I'm seeing that both among traditionalists and modernists, that there is something irreducible about memory. It's a real force that changes lives and that is out there, that is alive, that has an agency of its own. And this is something that goes for religious studies more broadly, namely that we need to be able to sit with the fact that it is both political and something more.

So, when do you reckon you're going to be able to finish the book or when it's going to hit the shelves?

Yesterday? I'm not going to say anything because then it will be jinxed and I will never finish it. But hopefully soon. Let's just say it will hopefully be under review this year.

Thank you for sharing your knowledge and wisdom. Before we stop, do you have anything you would like to add?

What I can say is that I think that as a teacher, one of my main goals is that we learn to see that religion is just not segmented away in certain parts of society, but that it has an impact on life at large.

And how does religion matter to us? And how does it matter how we approach it? What does this say about our positionality in the world and how we engage with things? I think religion sometimes seems like such a peripheral thing, because we're living in a very secular society. It doesn't seem to play a great role anymore, but it does. It is there both visibly, and invisibly. For example, in one of the classes that I've taught, I would tell this abstract story: "We have this boy, and he, right after his birth, has to leave under difficult circumstances, and then reappears as an older man and defeats the evil one, but dies and then comes back. Who is this?" And everybody immediately says "Jesus!" but no, I meant Harry Potter! So even the framework of a good story is completely, fundamentally shaped by certain religious ideas, certain religious narratives that have impacted our society over time in a way that just isn't measurable by how many people go to church, and how often specifically religious things are mentioned in public discourse. It is simply everywhere.