

# Editorial Overview: Moral Economies and Practicing Moral Laws in Religions

**Maria Frahm-Arp**  
mariafa@uj.ac.za

The second edition of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* for 2022 explores religion and moral economies as well as religion and moral legal practices. With this particular focus, the timing of this edition is poignantly relevant as we face a global recession, the war in the Ukraine, ongoing and deep-rooted corruption in various political systems throughout the world, and the rise of a form of Christianity – prophetic Pentecostalism – which appears to have a weak understanding of morality and ethics.

The majority of this edition is taken up by a ‘special edition’ section which has been thoughtfully edited by Abdulkader Tayob. In this section, the essays unpack the concept of ‘moral economy’ which, as Ukah in his introduction essay points out, has its origin in Christianity dating back to a sermon given in 1729 at Cambridge University. It became more popularly understood through the work of the British historian, E.P. Thompson as a tool for social analysis and interpretation, particularly of capitalism and its impact on the working classes of Britain. Over time it has become a concept that is fluid, generic, and used to analyze social history. More recently, it is understood as a means to call for justice in relation to market practices (Somers 2020:229), or the interrelation between moral-politics feelings and economic forces (Sayer 2000:80).

The different religious practices and philosophies of the world all have their own particular moral economies as they continuously work out their particular understandings and practices of the relation between economics, morality, and religion. In the special edition section of this publication, the authors of the four articles examine the moral economies of religions in various specific contexts across Christianity to Islam, offering us insights to ponder on as we continue to analyze the broader relations of economics, religions, politics, and morality in the landscapes where we are working. To this end, Ukah in his introduction essay, argues that ‘the moral economy framework remains a potentially helpful conceptual tool, capable of functioning in three principal ways: An explanatory (generic), prescriptive (critical), and heuristic (vintage) analytical lens’.

Three of the articles came from the sharing of papers and ideas in two different spaces, the first being a conference on Moral Economies of Religious Reforms in 2021 and the second a workshop on Religion and Moral Economies in 2022. The conference of July 2021 and the workshop of July 2022 were significantly funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa’s SARChI Chair on Islam, African Publics, and Religious Values<sup>1</sup>. A fourth article was commissioned for the special edition. All four of the essays have been made possible through the funding of the National Research Foundation of South Africa’s SARChI Chair on Islam, African Publics, and Religious Values.

The first article by Shaheed Tayob closely analyzes the relation between food, economics, religion, and morality through his ethnographic work of two Muslim restaurants in Mumbai. His work shows how the preparation and consumption of food are deeply informed and shaped by religious practices. The second article by Magnus Ehtler examines Isaiah Shembe’s Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC) in relation to the riots in KwaZulu-Natal in 2021. Through a detailed reading of Zulu history and practices of the NBC, Ehtler reveals a complex of Zulu moral economies of which the NBC is one. Musa Ibrahim’s article, located in Northern Nigeria, focuses on the *Yan Hisba* (moral police) who enforce Sharia law economic practices and shows the complex nature of the practice of moral economies and religions. The *Yan Hisba* were introduced to improve the economic practices and bring

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors of the articles published in this special issue acknowledge the research support of the NRF, Reference Number (UID) 85397. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these essays are those of the individual authors, and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this respect.

greater prosperity, but people are critical of the intervention which they argue, limits their economic practices. The fourth essay in the special edition section is by Abdulkader Tayob, who suggests that the moral economy emerges when the capitalist structure restricts the ability of people to flourish. In his essay, he goes back to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Tunisian historian and philosopher Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun who offers us two different ways of looking at livelihoods and sustainability.

Following these essays that specifically explore religions and moral economies, is an essay not linked to the special edition, but with ideas that complement it. The essay by Farid Esack, Raeesah Boomgaard, and Craig Vincent-Lambert examines the relation between faith and emergency medical care. The essay highlights the conflict that students face between their religious obligations and moral practices and the requirements of the university degree program.

The edition concludes with a review of Resane's book, *South African Christian experiences: From colonialism to democracy* (2020) that challenges the moral economies of Christianities, practiced in South Africa during the colonialism, apartheid, and the contemporary post-apartheid era. In this book, Resane powerfully argues for a different form of moral economy within contemporary South African Christianities. He argues that if this is not implemented soon, the current economic oppression, suffered by the vast majority of people in South Africa will not end.

## References

- Resane, K.T. 2020. *South African Christian experiences: From colonialism to democracy*. Bloemfontein: SunBonani Scholar.
- Sayer, A. 2000. Moral economy and political economy. *Studies in Political Economy* 61, 1: 79-104.
- Somers, M.R. 2020. The moral economy of the capitalist crowd: Utopianism, the reality of society, and the market as a morally instituted process in Karl Polanyi's *Great transformation*. *Humanity: International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 11, 2: 227-234.
- Thompson, E.P. 1971, The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past & Present* 50: 76-136.