

Gary Slater / Ivo Frankenreiter

Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf religiöse, politische und ökologische Grenzen

Report on the Postgraduate Conference in Münster (6.–7. November 2025)

1 The theme of borders — challenge and opportunity

As much as they often symbolize division, borders also serve as sites of connection and encounter. This duality was demonstrated across the two days of this conference, which employed the theme of borders to integrate a range of religious, political, and ecological projects in rich and surprising ways. The discussion was animated by the curious character of borders as being both a challenge and an opportunity. That borders can be challenging is obvious, given that borders are bound up within such contemporary impulses to raise walls, ostracize migrants, meld religious and political identities, and disregard planetary boundaries. That borders are also an opportunity is perhaps more surprising. The opportunity comes not just from the fact that they serve as occasions for encounter in concrete contexts, nor even because they stimulate reflection in the face of difference, but also because the term *border* encompasses a set of forms that can be brought together within a structured exchange. Facilitating such an exchange in terms of the borders within and between religious, political, and ecological systems was the task of the conference.

2 Overview of context and structure

Organized by *Gary Slater* (Münster) and *Ivo Frankenreiter* (München) as an output of the DFG project *Borders: Religious, Political, and Planetary*¹ and with the support of the Religion and Politics Excellence Cluster at the University of Münster, the conference took place in the Senatssaal at the Schloss at the University of Münster on the 6th and 7th of November 2025. The [program](#) for the conference was structured into three categories: political borders, religious borders, and ecological borders, each of which encompassed a keynote lecture and a short-paper panel. In his opening remarks, Slater

1 More: <https://www.uni-muenster.de/FB2/ics/forschen/Thinkingacrossborders.html> (23.01.2026).

noted the relevance of the theme of borders, not just as an ethical problem but as an academic metaphor. Providing working definitions for each border type and sketching how analyses can work within, across, and beyond the three types, he also explored how the theme of borders can be layered across four categories of experiential, systemic, metaphorical, and methodological representations. What makes such an endeavor possible is that the meaning of the word *borders* is vague and durable enough to accommodate, not only each of these four levels, but also all the three types — political, religious, and ecological borders — as formal categories available to analysis across various permutations.

3 Political Borders

The first border type engaged was political borders, which is the least metaphorical, most commonsense of the three categories. The keynote speaker in this section was *Svenja Ahlhaus* (Münster), whose lecture linked the systemic sense of borders with the methodological by acknowledging crises, not just in terms of borders, but also in terms of the academic commentaries about borders. On Ahlhaus's telling, these crises are fundamentally about defining — which is also demarcating — the political community, along with exclusions that reveal the instability of democracies themselves. With an atmosphere of crisis so prevalent, a key question becomes how to deal with states of emergency. On Ahlhaus's account, the alternatives of denying emergency and acknowledging-but-being-paralyzed by emergency are untenable, so the prescription for best avoiding these pincers is to look at pockets of creativity for democracy in practice.

The short papers for the political borders section looked at narratives, human rights, and postcolonial contexts. First, the paper from *Christopher Momanyi* (Münster) asked what kind of borders could work for postcolonial Africa, a geographic context notorious for its legacy of distant and top-down nineteenth century bordering. Working with the key distinction of border/boundary, Momanyi preferred the latter for being both more extended and more fluid. Momanyi's prescription was for boundaries to be applied on the ground in the form of extended zones that distinguish cultures and communities as well as lands. Second, the paper from *Stefan Einsiedel* (München) recognized the fundamental normativity of borders, distinguishing between boundary description, demarcation, and practice. Beyond its navigation of such fine-grained distinctions, Einsiedel's paper also recognized the power of narratives that, extended across a historical reception, create powerful assumptions that are difficult to dislodge. As a response to this challenge, Einsiedel prescribed attending to Martha Nussbaum and her capability

approach. Third and finally, the paper from *Josef Könning* (Osnabrück) explored the contradictions of human rights as conditioned, in practice, by the boundaries of political membership and, implicitly, by the boundaries of territory. Könning unfolded the theological significance of attempts to universalize these rights, framing borders as a kind of sorting measure.

4 Religious Borders

The keynote lecture for the category of religious borders was given by *Perry Schmidt-Leukel* (Münster), whose presentation expounded upon his signature fractal approach to religious diversity, not just in relation to the theme of borders, but also in light of a list of such interlocutors as Ioan Culianu or William Jackson. For those unfamiliar with the concept of fractals, it owes its pedigree to Benoît Mandelbrot and is distinguished by its replication of common forms at nested intervals across an infinite scale. A significant entailment for Schmidt-Leukel's approach is that the typological diversity between religious traditions is replicated within each one of them. This implies that certain features of one tradition also reappear in different form and with different emphasis in other traditions. Hence borders are porous and religions are entangled even before they ever meet. The open question of why similar differences appear across various religious may be answered by the hypothesis that such typological difference can be seen as complementary. Schmidt-Leukel explored this hypothesis by looking at various typological differences between and within Buddhism and Christianity. The complementarity thesis would allow for a constructive learning within and across religious borders.

In this section's short-paper session, *Gregor Buß* (Paderborn) spoke of borders in terms of spatial demarcations of sacred space. His talk employed the practices associated with the *eruv* within Judaism as a tool for thinking about the boundaries between religious and non-religious, private and public worlds. The paper also represented a conceptual opportunity for thinking about relations between Judaism and Catholicism on the basis of concrete practices as well as abstract conceptual structures. Of key interest here was the practical question of how spaces are navigated and constructed differently by different communities. In this respect, the paper reflected the similarly capacious character of political borders in being both concrete and abstract. In the second paper from the section, *Mara Klein* (Münster) engaged with gender and sexuality within the Catholic tradition. In one of the most direct engagements with the conference theme, Klein asked the key question: where does gender as a boundary reach its limits? With detailed attention to the history of the Church and its staunch promotion of essentialized

gender divisions (on natural grounds), a strong suggestion arising from the paper is that the metaphor of the border has reached its limit in this case. Klein also advanced a prescriptive claim regarding nature and the human as normative categories that can be enlisted to overcome the exclusionary references to nature on the part of the Church.

5 Ecological Borders

The keynote for the ecological borders section constituted its own border-crossing demonstration, in that it was a three-person collaboration between *Bodo Philipp* (Münster), a microbiologist, *Tillmann Buttschardt* (Münster), an ecological systems expert, and *Doris Fuchs* (Münster), a political scientist, all of them being collaborators from the *Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Nachhaltigkeitsforschung* (ZIN). With references to the planetary boundaries model of Earth Systems ecology, the presenters understood limits as a condition for future viability. In Philipp's presentation, it was highlighted that microorganisms as the most ancient and most abundant forms of life shape ecological borders from the microscopic to the planetary scale and, thereby, maintain the living conditions for macro-organisms including humans. In Fuchs's presentation, this same orientation grounded itself in questions of how to live together within limits, not so much as clear-cut boundaries but as limits that shape life through time by relating human needs satisfaction to resource consumption. A manifestation of this idea is in Fuchs's notion of a *consumption corridor*, defined by democratically negotiated consumption minima and maxima that enable a good life for all within planetary boundaries, and the related requirement to pursue not just innovation but also exnovation. This formed the basic theoretical expression of Buttschardt's talk, which fundamentally classified boundaries and transitions in the anatomy and physiology of the Earth system, while remaining sensitive to the different forms of interaction made possible by such margins and transitions — or at its most general, simply distinctions — but also the pluralism, both interpretatively and biologically, that the conceptual arrangement entails.

In the short-paper session for this category, *Stefan Huber* (Bamberg) presented, with plenty of empirical evidence in support, a thoughtful reinforcement, not just of the value of respecting limits, but of the implications for actually developing an ethic of abstinence as a moral duty. Such a view was consistent with the keynote's points about limits and their essential role in life, and also about the virtues in thinking about margins and transitions instead of impermeable borders. In her presentation, *Anne Konsek* (Paderborn) articulated views similar to the other contributions within this category in its respect for limits, yet her paper was also unique in both its

inclusion of the category of acceleration and integration of the boundaries within species, between species, and between North and South in global terms. With that last point in mind, a suggestion also bears attending to in terms of engaging the distinction between the notion of the planet and that of the globe, which has been raised by postcolonial as well as environmental commentators.

6 Assessment of the Conference

In his closing remarks, Frankenreiter spoke about the permeability and inter-relatedness embedded within the conference theme of borders. This raised a helpful point in terms of assessing the program of the conference as a whole, which is that, if a border is a way of seeing as much as an object of inquiry, then objects from other categories, disciplines, and projects do appear instructively different when viewed across these multiple categories of borders. What this ultimately attests to most strongly is the analytical value of borders, not so much for solving problems, but rather for establishing connections that reflect and stimulate creative questions. The preponderance across the conference program of papers with *Borders as [X]* (or some variation thereof) in their titles reflected this. Hence borders can be uniquely political as the source of the metaphor and for its intuitive and concrete understanding and yet also be taken further.

In spite of its value, the perspectival nature of borders understood in methodological terms also speaks to some of the fundamental limitations of the conference. One particular question concerns the limits of the theme itself. What are the borders of borders? That is, what are the limits of the scope of this theme? One would do well to form a grudging respect for their own limits as well as for borders themselves, not just ecologically but also religiously and politically, as well. The suggestion, ultimately, is that, as borders are facts of life and thought, we must live with them. Therefore, we should at least think with them and try use them better.

Über die Autoren

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Cite as

Slater, Gary; Frankenreiter, Ivo (2026): Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf religiöse, politische und ökologische Grenzen. Report on the Postgraduate Conference in Münster (6.–7. November 2025), (JCSW Pre-Print 67), 1–6, online unter <<https://www.uni-muenster.de/Ejournals/index.php/jcsw/libraryFiles/downloadPublic/183>>.