Quo vadis, History of Religion? Outline of a Historical–Theoretical Problem

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ISSN: 2750–7165

URL: https://gtw.hypotheses.org/8525

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Quo vadis, History of Religion? Outline of a Historical-Theoretical Problem

The study of religion and its history in the 20th century is booming. Taken together, however, scholarly research and findings resemble a diffuse patchwork. The application of theory in the field of the history of religion may also be described as ambiguous, chaotic, and unclear. The question thus arises: what part does the theory of history play in the study of the history of religion? To what extent does the history of religion need theory?

History of religion: a German patchwork

For over twenty years, the maxim that it is important to study religion(s) has been recited like a prayer throughout German academia. Funding for (major) projects, research networks, and PhD and Habilitation theses on subjects of the history of religion underscore the value that is attributed to the field. These research projects and their findings, however, do not coalesce to produce a holistic picture, but rather leave behind a large number of fragments scattered across the research landscape of German academia—for a variety of reasons.

In the first place, religion as a subject is studied in several different scholarly disciplines, including history, theology and church history, religious studies, and the sociology of religion. This variety makes it possible to research the history of religion(s) from several nuanced perspectives. Lines of research are as numerous and diverse as the objects of study themselves are. Efforts to draw intra- and interconfessional comparisons through large-scale research projects and networks and to pay greater attention to marginalized groups and people are a welcome development; but it is still unclear how individual topics, questions, and findings might be integrated, or whether the intended goal is in fact to string up individual lines of research and leave them hanging parallel to one another like a beaded curtain. Historical-theoretical questions moreover seldom receive consideration at all in many scholars’ work.

The patchwork “of many colors” that this state of affairs produces consists of numerous pieces that are only loosely connected (if at all). They are difficult to organize, sort, and compare, and they project a blurry rather than a clear picture of the history of religion in the 20th century. This hazy image is reinforced by a broad failure to answer the key question of the meaning and purpose of the history of
religion. In consequence, the field risks losing all sense of purpose while it remains unclear to what extent the history of religion can and should produce a theoretical framework to give it direction in times of change. Why do individual disciplines need to engage with religion? How might we describe the relationship between the history of religion and historiography in general? What is the history of religion, and what is its self-conception as a research field? What can the history of religion contribute to the construction of historical meaning? Does the cognitive process need a synthesis (whatever that might look like)? The answers to these questions are frequently vague and dissatisfying.

The object and the study thereof

A glance at the field of history in Germany reveals not only heightened interest in but also an urgent need for research on religion for contemporary history. There are no professorial chairs for recent /contemporary history and the history of religion in Germany. Here too we can see how the patchwork nature of the field has created problems of localization, classification, and interpretation of the phenomenon religion in the 20th and 21st centuries. Efforts to bring clarity and order to the study of religion often take the form of compound constructions: religion and the modern world, religion and society, religion and politics, religion and...

Religion, in the first place, thus always and only ever exists in conjunction with something else, not independently. Second, in German-language research (as compared, for example, to American research on the history of religion), these compound formulations always separate religion from the second item in the pair (e.g., society); they thus conceive and construct religion as something external to that thing. In consequence, religion and its history are made to fit existing concepts, chronologies, and narratives. This approach inevitably causes problems. How might it affect research agendas and objects of inquiry if we integrated religion and asked about religion in the modern world, in society, or in politics? What might happen if we critically examined how and how much the scholarly localization of religion in society as “religion and society” limits our research practices and conception of religion? And how exactly might we achieve an intertwined history of religion and historiography (beyond familiar narratives—see below)?

This shift of focus alone does not solve any of the problems mentioned above. We also must acknowledge that it is difficult to define the object of the history of religion itself. The idea or underlying concept of religion that is utilized in research is
itself ambiguous. The study of religion becomes virtually unfeasible without a clear definition and attribution, a problem that plagues recent and contemporary history in particular. The ease of use, practicability, and transferability of different definitions proposed in various disciplines raise further questions, and not simply because some definitions of religion are highly reductionist while others verge on all-encompassing. What is religion? And how necessary is a definition, and how exact must it be, to research this phenomenon? Why do American historians not or seldom have this problem, and what can we learn from them for contemporary German history? And is secularization really the only answer, or is this social theory perhaps the root of the problem?

We further can observe that an essential feature of religion/religiosity, namely “belief,” has not been defined and studied; or rather, it appears only, and then only partly, in the form of secondary concepts (e.g., piety, transcendence). In the German context, a supposed “lack” of verifiable evidence is readily blamed for the difficulty of conducting such research, because the influence of religion/religiosity is so difficult to measure and confirm. In other words, it always remains an open question whether the belief or religiosity of a person or group, for instance, was responsible for their behavior and actions, or whether other factors also were involved. Such scholarly skepticism rears its head far less often in connection with other categories (background, ethnicity, gender) or non-Christian religions (e.g., Islam). Why then do German historians treat the biographical impact of Christianity (and Judaism) with such caution? What is the point of a history of religion that ignores the religiosity of individuals and groups? And perhaps even more fundamentally, I ask with deliberate ambivalence: Is it even possible to study religion without belief—whether that of one’s object or one’s own?

Yet instead of reconsidering and critically questioning field-specific “tenets of faith” and excessive scholarly skepticism, scholars call for more empirical research in the name of the production of knowledge. A larger, more diverse body of primary sources, experimentation with theoretical approaches, and analysis of religious content and its development promise to deliver advances of knowledge—and so the patchwork grows. It remains to be seen whether this research approach will bear fruit, if the narrative framework, concepts, chronologies, identified relationships, and so on remain the same.

What is more, even when scholars are supposed to determine the relationship of religion to certain concepts, those concepts remain equally hazy and unclear. This is especially true of the concept of “the modern world” (“die Moderne”). As we muse
over religion and the modern world in terms of contemporary history, we often forget that there is an inherent asymmetry in this relationship that many research plans, approaches, and interpretive attempts completely overlook. In historical research, the modern age is always conceived as secular, as the center of historical narratives and thus construed as hegemonic. Religion, in contrast, is viewed as a distinct, separate entity on the periphery of the modern world.

The narrative depiction of the history of religion

Both the German and the American approaches to writing the history of religion spring from an attempt to understand the relationship between religion and the modern world, to analyze the evolving phenomenon of religion in the Western world, and to theorize how it affects society. These interests also manifest a desire for a cogent longue durée (and, with it, a master narrative?). A comparison of these national “schools” highlights their striking differences more prominently than their commonalities. Historians on the European and American side of the Atlantic, for example, operate with completely different social theories as explanatory models for historical development.

Among German historians, religious-historical narratives are based primarily on the secularization theory. The point of departure is the assumption that modernization, the differentiation of society, privatization, and individualization leads to a significant decline in religion and religiosity. Scholars translate this postulate into stories of the triumph of modernity and the decline of Christian communities. Hence, for many years, historical narratives adopted a predetermined teleological and normative perspective. The secularization theory has been the target of extensive criticism among historians in Germany and abroad in the last two decades—on account of its Eurocentricity, the “exception” represented by the United States, and the Return of Religions and Second Coming of the Gods. What remains is the impression that the secularization theory can be applied only, if at all, to individual theses and aspects in order to construct historical chains of causality. Here we see one of the reasons for the patchwork discussed above. The fact that, in the German context, there is no discussion about what a religious-historical narrative might and should look like without recourse to the secularization theory is thus even more interesting.

In the United States, we can observe that historians are attempting to develop a new social theory to take the place of the narrative of modernization. The concept of “culture wars,” coined by James D. Hunter in the 1990s, has been meaningful in
this context. In his book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, Hunter attempts to get to the bottom of the religious, political, and cultural conflicts of his time. In his opinion, these conflicts stem from competition between two different moral systems, between the “orthodox” and the “progressive,” to shape the present and future social reality of the United States. Whereas Hunter and others place the beginning of this conflict in the 1960s, more recent studies posit the origins or at least individual aspects of these culture wars much earlier in American history. The extension of this idea to other areas of society and history gives rise to a social theory that shapes and changes both the historical narratives and the contemporary self-conception of American society. While Enlightenment values, ideas of modernity, and secularization continue to serve as the guiding principles of historical narratives in the German case, the example of the United States illustrates how scholars have declared religion the driving force of history.

That does not mean, vice versa, that the approaches developed by new American social theory have not also reverberated in Germany. Attempts have been made to transfer the culture wars to Germany, as illustrated by the discourse of growing social division, which is mentioned with increasingly regularity in electoral campaigns. Only religion has been lost in transmission. It (so far) is not a factor in the German version. Will future German historiography still need the history of religion and research on it, if religion vanishes from social theory and becomes irrelevant? Or are we witnessing a late blossoming of the secularization theory? It would still be more reasonable to ask in what way German academia/society might justify attributing greater agency to religion than has hitherto been the case? Why is German scholars’ relationship with religion so complicated, hazy, and disorganized? Why is religion kept at arm’s length, marginalized theoretically, while we attach such great importance to it for our research?

**Outlook**

What lies ahead for German research on the history of religion? The effort to determine the significance and purpose of religion in the modern world and in modern and contemporary history and the associated quest for new historical narratives and explanatory models are absolutely necessary—and not merely for historical interpretation. We must reconsider, deconstruct, and potentially even demolish implicit doctrines and concepts embedded in the field, as well as their hierarchies, narrative modes, and the relationship between social theory and historical theory. We should rethink concepts, theories, and methodologies, bid
farewell to some terminologies and test others, if we want to think and write about the history of religion in a new way. In certain circumstances, it may even prove salutary to liberate ourselves from the narrative of the modern world and secularization so that we may explain the phenomenon of religion in its historical relationships and causalities. It would be also appealing to put the relationship between theory and empiricism up for discussion and more urgently ask “Why?” Why is there a need for historiographical research on the history of religion? Historical-theoretical lines of inquiry do not offer a comprehensive solution to this problem, but they provide an indispensable foundation. That would be a start.

Translated by John Noël Dillon

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Tags: History of religion / Modern world / Secularization

1 For example, Achim Landwehr uses the same language in his blog entry on the “transcendent ambitions” of Emmanuel Levinas and inquires into the “viability of a transcendent historiography.” Why are Levinas’s beliefs and/or religiosity as a scholar of the Talmud omitted from the discussion, and why do we not talk about religious historiographies?
