

RELIGION TO THE POWER OF THREE

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1. *Doing Conceptual History of Religion in a Global Context*

In its 3rd research field the Interdisciplinary Research Consortium “Dynamics in the History of Religion between Asia and Europe” explores the history of religious concepts, especially the history of the concept of ‘religion’ itself.¹ The contributions collected in this volume open a discussion on comparative religious history, which will go on in the Consortium for the next years. They deal with three major issues: the *theory of the axial age* (Assmann), interreligious quarrels about the *concept of holy war* (Syed), the *concept of religion in China* (Barrett/Tarocco, Ford Campany, McCutcheon) and the *concept of canonisation* (Davidson, Zehnder). Of course, these can be but exemplary studies, intending to open broad perspectives on the history of religion between Asia and Europe and a scientific practice of self-reflection, which is necessary in order to bridge such huge spaces and periods of time as the Consortium is going to do. In the following opening remarks I should like to focus some problems, which have to be observed and solved, if we want to succeed with our efforts.

1.1. *Concepts as Structures of Society*

Religious concepts cannot be considered as belonging to the concept of religion in a way comparable to pieces within a container. Each of them has its own structure deciding what is included and what excluded, and this structure may well change over time and space. Looking closer to the pragmatic usage made of them over time we find, that many of these structural distinctions run different from the distinction of “the religious” and “the non-religious”: A term like ‘piety’ for instance may refer to a religious but also to a secular virtue,

¹ Cf. Project description on the homepage of the Käte-Hamburger-Kolleg: <http://khk.ceres.rub.de>.

hence 'impious' may be called as much an atheist as a mean man who has no honour.² To give another example: 'confession' may be called a religious act, but also an act in civil court procedures; hence to deny a confession may refer either to the opposition to a religious believe system or to deny an accusation at court. Depending on its present usage different things are included resp. excluded. It is not easy to define a religious language separate from secular language.

But what most terms considered in the work of the consortium have in common is, that in the European languages they were built up to concepts in early modern times. So far they all belong to a historical wave of European concept building, which centred between the 16th and 18th century owing much to the reception of Hebrew, Greek and Latin scholarly traditions. This is also true for the term 'religio'/religion' which despite of its long lasting tradition in medieval writings became a wide spread term only in the 16th and a key concept of European societies only in the 18th and 19th centuries. Pushing other terms like 'law' or 'teaching' or 'sect' aside the term was broadly accepted for the worship of god by a social group of believers, pointing as much to the variety of different practices in the world as to the assumed general readiness of people to worship some kind of god at all.³

It is not the place here to go deeper into this historical process of establishing 'religion' as the general linguistic reference point of all mental and social activities, which may be covered by this term today. I should rather focus on some problems connected with the ambition to extend the methods of conceptual history first to religious concepts in general, and second to religious items in non-European cultures:

² Cf. "Pious", in: *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 7, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 892.

³ Cf. Michel Despland, *La religion en occident. Évolution des idées et du vécu*, Montréal: Fides 1979; Ernst Feil, *Religio. Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristentum bis zur Reformation*, 4 vols., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1986–2007; Hans-Michael Haufsig, *Der Religionsbegriff in den Religionen. Studien zum Selbst- und Religionsverständnis in Hinduismus, Buddhismus, Judentum und Islam*, Berlin: Philo 1999; Mathias Hildebrandt/Manfred Brocker (eds.), *Der Begriff der Religion. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag 2008; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The meaning and end of religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991; Falk Wagner, *Was ist Religion? Studien zu ihrem Begriff und Thema in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Gütersloh: G. Mohr 1986.

1.2. Words and Objects

Conceptual history in the German tradition of the "*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*"⁴ is based on the theoretical assumption that words and historical objects are linked together in the actual meaning of a word within a given context, but that they have to be considered apart from one another in looking to their historical change.⁵ Historical objects like the industrial revolution may have occurred long before the concept 'industrial revolution' labelling it today was invented, or their realisation may be anticipated as in the case of 'communism'.⁶ This is important for taking into account that historical objects are constituted not only by the contemporaries, but also by later or foreign observers like historians or anthropologists. There is no "nominalistic" link between language and reality in general, but only in the presence of a given speech act.⁷

This theory of conceptual history works quite well with social and political objects, which can be studied independently from the contemporary conceptualisation. By comparison and new findings we indeed may know much more about historical objects such as pre-modern "states" or "markets" today than the contemporaries were able to express. But this cannot be said in the same way of religious objects: Their reality depends much more on the objectification of contemporary practices, naming them is an essential part of their identification. Today for instance it is fashionable to write a "biography" of the Christian God,⁸ but of course this is nothing but following the changing reports about God in the Bible or its reception and commentaries. To think religious objects like God or a future world after death independent from man's imagination and worship may be called a theological necessity (as Karl Barth and others did), but such a statement is bound to the practice of believers to take them as being independent.

⁴ Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhard Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols., Stuttgart: Klett 1972–1998.

⁵ Cf. Reinhard Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006.

⁶ Cf. Lucian Hölscher "Industrie", in: Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhard Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3, Stuttgart: Klett 1982, 296–297; Wolfgang Schieder, "Kommunismus", in: Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhard Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3, Stuttgart: Klett 1982, 455–457.

⁷ Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "The Concept of Conceptual History (Begriffsgeschichte) and the 'Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe'", in: Hallym Academy of Sciences (ed.), *Concept and Communication*, vol. 1, no. 2, Seoul: Hallym University Press 2008, 179–198.

⁸ Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

1.3. *Contested Concepts in Religious History*

All key concepts in highly developed societies are basically contested.⁹ Different groups in society take them in a different understanding or they even deny their usage. In this sense to be "contested" may be called an essential feature of concepts used in daily life.¹⁰ But religious concepts are contested in an even more radical sense: In modern societies of the West there are often intellectual, political and social tensions to be found between those who believe in the real existence of what these concepts refer to, and those who challenge it. Hence in modern Western societies, which rely on the coexistence of these groups, it is impossible to define religious objects as such: Scientific research may deal with 'gods' or 'sacred places', but it can never prove that these 'gods' exist outside the mind of those who believe in them, or that certain places are sacred. Scientific research can only ascertain that they are *seen* and *treated* by some people as being sacred.

That's why studies on the history of religious concepts depend so much more on the concepts of the contemporaries than studies on the history of political and social objects as such: They avouch and stand for the existence of what they point to. This also accounts for the great number and high diversity of definitions, what 'religion' is. There is no general agreement on a scientific usage of the concept 'religion'. Many scholars even argue that there can be no agreement at all, because each concept privileges a certain religious tradition excluding others from the status of being a religion.¹¹ The impression prevails that religion in terms of scientific definition is a pure construction, despite its reality as social and mental practice.

This also makes clear the special character of modern Western religiosity compared to that of other regions of the world: Religion in modern societies of the West, at least in the Christian tradition, is always defined from within, i. e. the believers, and from without, i. e. the non-

⁹ Cf. Walter Bryce Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts", in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956), 167-198, and the following debate.

¹⁰ Cf. Wikipedia, "essentially contested concepts" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essentially_contested_concept (last modified on 24 October 2010); Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory - A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998.

¹¹ Among many others cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Religion im Wandel. Von Begriffen des religiösen Wandels zum Wandel religiöser Begriffe", in: Wilhelm Gräb (ed.), *Religion als Thema der Theologie. Geschichte, Standpunkte und Perspektiven theologischer Religionskritik und Religionsbegründung*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1999, 45-62.

believers. The critique of religion (taken in the form of theories, which deny the outside existence of religious objects) plays an essential role in defining what religion is. This can easily be proved by looking to religious concepts such as 'the transcendent', a 'future life' after death, or to concepts such as 'God', 'devil' or the 'angels'. But it is true for other concepts, too, concepts such as 'piety' or 'fate' or 'contingency'. Those who do not believe in the religious content of these concepts nevertheless have put their stamp on their socially excepted meaning.

1.4. *Translating Religious Concepts*

This cannot be said to the same extent for societies outside Christian Europe and even not for Christian Europe in pre-modern times. The European "Sonderweg"¹² probably is the outcome of various factors which still have to be explored more carefully: a special structure of the religious system in Christian societies, which tended to draw sharp lines between believers and non-believers; another type or intensity of social communication, which bound both groups together in defining the proper place of religion in society; and behind all these factors may be even the European co-existence of many different religious groups such as Christians, Moslems and Jews in medieval and modern times, which derived from the same religious and cultural sources in antiquity, had its impact.

All these factors may account for the difficulty to translate the European concepts to the languages of other regions of the world resp. to find equivalent concepts there. Nevertheless they were translated and established as indigenous concepts in almost all non-European societies by the end of the 19th century. This demonstrates above all that translation of concepts is not so much a question of adequacy between "real" objects in different languages, but rather an act of making them equal resp. different. Conceptual history has to be done in a pragmatic way in order to follow these processes of translation.

But it also shows that at least for a long period of reception conceptual history and conceptual policy in these countries are concerned with other disputes than in Western societies: Instead of being contested and disputed among believers and non-believers, as in modern Christian societies of the West, in non-Western resp. non-Christian

¹² Cf. Hartmut Lehmann, *Säkularisierung. Der europäische Sonderweg in Sachen Religion*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2004.

societies these concepts are contested between those, who support or oppose Western societies. This mental structure may be overwritten by the religious/non-religious-pattern as in the case of communist China, but in any case it makes disputes about religions in these countries more complex and more-dimensional.

2. Religion to the Power of Two and Three

2.1. The Discovery of Religion

How old is religion? We do not know. But we know that the question itself is almost as old as the concept of religion itself. In the intellectual history of modern Europe it has passed many forms and stages from the early esoteric literature of Georgios Gemistos and Marsilio Ficino in 15th century Italy through the enigmatic speculations of 18th century freemasonry and the well known sketches of Lessing, Herder and Hegel in the German philosophy of history up to the more scientific theories of Saint-Simon, Wundt, Durkheim, Weber and many other authors of the 19th and early 20th century, demonstrating a historical development from pre-religious animism through the religions of revelation to modern science and rationality.

But in all these attempts to historicize religion there was little concern for dating the origin of religion. It was Karl Jaspers' theory of the axial age, which first tried to do this. According to Karl Jaspers between 800 and 200 BCE religious systems developed, independent from one another, in four regions of the Eurasian continent: Daoism and Confucianism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Zoroastrianism and Judaism in the Near and Middle East, Greek cults and philosophy in Europe.¹³ The theory of axial age, further elaborated in the writings of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and many others from the 1970s onwards¹⁴, did much for the discussion of religion in comparative and historical terms. Nowadays to take religion as a historical phenomenon is a common practice in all religious studies. History is a major reference point in defining the reality of religion all over the world. To underline this is important even when we concede that religion is a cultural or anthropological concept, which in itself includes various

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München, Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949.

¹⁴ Cf. the contribution of Jan Assmann in this volume.

concepts of history: There is constant pressure on comparative studies of religious concepts to relate them to one another in terms of historical chronology.

2.2. The Discovery of the Discovery of Religion

In dating the discovery of religion religious studies usually go back to antiquity or to pre-historic times. But taking into consideration that the concept of 'religion' was developed much later, we enter a second level of reflection and historical dating: "religion to the power of two", so to speak. Here the semantic patterns of religion are considered, which were established only in modern times. Hence the discovery of the discovery of religion is something, which has to be discussed on another level of scientific research.

Already in the European encyclopedias of the 19th century articles on religion usually started with relating the history of religion back to the history of the concept 'religion' itself. By doing so these articles made clear that the history of religion as a historical object is closely linked to the rise of the concept. Instead of being told as a historical narrative about changing believe-systems, institutions and practices, the history of religion was situated on the meta-level of language. That's why even in the 20th century the articles on 'Religionsgeschichte' (history of religion) in the German encyclopedia "Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart"¹⁵ never comprised a historical narrative about the various religious cultures in the world, but only reports about the development of the discipline "Religionsgeschichte".

However, under the conditions of 19th century epistemology, language and history were taken as but two sides of the same medal: According to this epistemology the linguistic roots of the word 'religion' pointed to the roots of religion themselves. There was no distinction made between the history of the term 'religion' and the history of what that term referred to. Only by the late 19th century, when in the new disciplines of religious studies and sociology of religion systematic approaches to religious history were developed, the exploration of etymology and of religious objects in the past could be taken apart. Now investigations on the history of religion were based on systematic

¹⁵ *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1st edition 1909–1913, 2nd edition 1927–1931, 3rd edition 1957–1964.

definitions of religion, which were designed to cover as many "religious" objects as possible all over space and time.

By doing so the field of historical and comparative research could be extended far beyond the limits of Christian Europe. Of course, in the age of colonialism and imperialism Christianity, where the concept of 'religion' was at home, still was taken as the paradigm and hidden agenda of all these efforts. But this was either not apparent or not questioned; in the contrary, by being extended to other religious cultures the study of religion seemed to get a broader and more solid conceptual framework: Concepts such as 'rite' and 'symbol', 'the sacred' and 'the transcendent', 'magic' and 'animism' were taken as universal categories applicable to all religions wherever. But in the course of time, towards the middle of the 20th century this turned out to be an illusion. It became clear that the categories of religious studies were heavily biased: They described ancient and foreign religions in modern categories of Christian Europe and didn't care much for the immanent logic and structure of their real existence.¹⁶

Hence language came in again, but in a different way. In the early stage of religious studies before and after 1900 terms of those who lived with the religious objects, terms like 'totem' or 'karma', were introduced to scientific descriptions. Suggesting that there was something in reality corresponding to them, they were taken as adequate scientific terms, in a way as existentials. Later it became obvious that such an identification of terms with objects was problematic. But since the religious object was difficult to be described without reference to the label, which the users put on them, the pragmatic usage of indigenous concepts and of the external concepts of foreign observers became more and more important. Religious history began to include a semantic dimension by the second half of the 20th century. Today it cannot be dismissed any more.

On this level of a self-reflective study of religion it makes sense to prefer another concept of religious history: To distinguish between the semantics of the contemporary users and the semantics of external observers doesn't mean any more that only contemporary semantics are adequate to describe religious objects. But to underline the external perspective on religious objects takes into account that they imply a

¹⁶ Cf. Hans G. Kippenberg/Jörg Rüpke/Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Europäische Religionsgeschichte. Ein mehrfacher Pluralismus*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2009.

religious practice and structure, which is different from the practice and structure of the indigenous users.

Hence it is possible to explain the new dimension of religious studies in the following way: In the axial age theory the discovery of the transcendent was dated to the first millennium BC, but the discovery of the semantic patterns of this discovery belongs to the second half of the 20th century. The same is true of many other historical relations between objects and meta-language: The discovery of monotheism for instance may be ascribed to the time of the Egyptian pharaoh Echnaton and the Jewish prophet Mose, as Jan Assmann does.¹⁷ But the conceptualisation of monotheism has been accomplished only in early modern Europe. Hence it makes sense to assign the origin of monotheism to the age of European enlightenment.

2.3. *The Discovery of the Discovery of the Discovery of Religion?*

Historicising the historicisation of religious concepts raises the question, what stands behind such an activity: What is the perspective we make use of in historicising religious concepts? Under which historically specific conditions seems such a historicisation evident for many people? Or to put in another way: What is the epistemological status of conceptual history in the 20th century? In order to find an answer to such questions we may start with the hypothesis, that historicising general concepts as much as theories is a way to come to terms with contradictory claims and definitions. Arguing that a concept or a theory is appropriate to a certain period of time or region in the world, is a way to assign a limited truth to them. By doing so the contradiction of claiming universal applicability for concepts, which are not compatible with one another, is solved without deciding which is right and which is wrong.

But any historicisation implies a perspective on history, some hypothesis about the origin and the end of historical development. Hans Joas in a recent article has argued that for Reinhart Koselleck, the leading conceptual historian in 20th century Germany, an implicit idea of secularisation (which owed much to the concept of Karl Löwith) was the driving force for doing conceptual history.¹⁸ According to Koselleck,

¹⁷ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaikische Unterscheidung oder Der Preis des Monotheismus*, München: Carl Hanser 2003.

¹⁸ Cf. Hans Joas, "Die Kontingenz der Säkularisierung – Überlegungen zum Problem der Säkularisierung im Werk Reinhart Kosellecks", in: Hans Joas/Peter Vogt (eds.),

Joas argues, in the "Sattelzeit", the century between the middle of the 18th and of the 19th centuries, religious concepts were steadily replaced by secular concepts. Taken this to be the case one may argue, that for Koselleck from the 18th century onwards religious concepts lost more and more of their former persuasive power; but that today Koselleck's perspective begins to lose evidence itself, because secularisation seems to be not so evident for many people.

It may be left open, whether this is a fair description of the Koselleckian concept of conceptual history. We also could argue with Koselleck, that in doing conceptual history we cannot historicize all categories at the same time. We have to fix some conceptual reference points in order to define a historical perspective resp. a hypothesis for the story we want to elaborate. And since we have to organise evidence for such a story (which in any case is more than summing up empirical data from the past), every conceptual history is open to be questioned and revised.

In doing so we enter a third level of historical reflection: "religion to the power of three", so to speak. But what do we discover here? At first glance it seems a never ending regress to observe the observer of an observation ... But looking closer it seems to me that such an activity doesn't lead us to higher levels of historicisation, but rather to a kind of de-historization of religious history. It doesn't make sense to construct a new master-narrative of the historical development of religion on the 3rd level, because all historical master-narratives are based on past facts and mentalities, i. e. on the 1st and 2nd level.

It is true, every master-narrative has its time and loses evidence under changing conditions in the changing past. But what remains is but a strong version of those concepts of the past, which have succeeded to set their stamp on a limited space of historical reality. Something of past narratives survives, when the narrative itself loses its evidence. In late Roman historiography for instance the death of Caesar was part of the basic myth of the Roman empire. But even, when this master-narrative lost its evidence in modern historiography, it opened a new epoch of world history. The myth of the Roman Empire was implanted into modern historiography in the way that

it was reduced to a "strong" fact, a turning point of world history.¹⁹ The same is true of all narratives in religious history: They may reflect the conditions under which older narratives have been born and have died, but they nevertheless are narratives on the 2nd level. Hence there is a necessary perspective on religion from the sociology of science, but no "religious history to the power of three".

Taking all this together we may sum up our efforts in three points: First, it is necessary to consider religious concepts not only as tools for understanding religious culture all over the world, but also as social practices. Second, we have to take into account the different strategies of concept building in various religious cultures in order to define the dimension of their social and scientific "exploitation". And last, but not least we have to reflect the religious concepts, which we make use of in scientific research, as much in their historical context as our historical findings in relation to systematic concepts. Religious history should not be done any more without a dimension of conceptual self-reflection, i. e. as "religion to the power of two and three".

¹⁹ Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "The New Annalistic. A Sketch of a Theory of History", in: *History and Theory* 36 (1997), 317–335; Lucian Hölscher, *Neue Annalistik. Umriss einer Theorie der Geschichte*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2003.

Begriffene Geschichte. Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2010, 309–338, here 327ff.