

## INTRODUCTION

# Global Perspectives on Religion as an Object of Historical and Social Scientific Study

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### **Religion as an object of research: Challenges and directions**

Readers of this journal will need not much of an introduction to challenges of the usefulness of “religion” as a category of transregional and transhistorical research. Who today would still plainly assert that religion is a universal phenomenon that can be identified in all human societies at all times? It has been no less than sixty years since the publication of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), now canonical in the Study of Religion. Subsequently, post-colonial perspectives have heightened attentiveness to the nexus between knowledge and power more broadly. In the case of “religion”, this nexus arguably manifested itself in a modern Christian, sometimes said to be more specific liberal Protestant, understanding of religion that was spread (if not violently institutionalized) globally through the support of colonial power. According to Timothy Fitzgerald’s *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), the academic discipline itself has been complicit in formatting and establishing such a normatively biased category of “religion”. In a special issue of this very journal dedicated to his book “Twenty Years After,” Fitzgerald (2019) extends his critique beyond “religion” to include other master categories of the humanities and social sciences as ideological carrier of liberal capitalism.

Whereas such radical, morally motivated critique in the end would seem to call for the abolishing of academic disciplines altogether, the more

constructive task still consists of rethinking and reconfiguring scholarly categories. It has been in the discipline of Religious Studies itself that the concept of “religion” has been most debated and criticized. Arguments for the particular modern Western implications of “religion” have even been characterized as a new “unquestioned orthodoxy” (Abbasi 2021, 4), and as wrongly blocking the view for earlier, non-Christian usages of “religion”. Claims to the Eurocentrism of “religion” certainly continue to raise awareness for the historicity and normativity of concepts and might provide fruitful hypotheses for case studies. However, without attending to potential usages of or alternatives to “religion” in a variety of historical and cultural contexts, they do remain on the level of assertions and are even ill-suited to spell out what the alleged Eurocentrism consists of precisely. On the most basic level, it nevertheless remains true that not only Religious Studies, but also other disciplines of the humanities and social sciences are existentially challenged because of the deconstruction of their foundational categories, and they show similar strategies in (not) dealing with these challenges (Josephson-Storm 2021, esp. ch. 2).

The present status of academic category-building could be characterized as paradoxical. On the one hand, there is widespread awareness of the historicity and normativity of theoretical concepts themselves, which consequently seem ill-suited to grasp an ever-pluralizing variety of cases. On the other hand, this very pluralization and the seemingly increasing socio-political and cultural fragmentation of our global present demands orientation through theoretical categorization. This paradox might indeed call for a rethinking of the very premises of theory-building, in order to go beyond both modernist universalism and post-modern particularism. In this vein, Jason Josephson-Storm (2021) fruitfully suggests “metamodernism” as a new mode of theorization. On the epistemic premise of a process ontology, this theory understands order to be temporary and even exceptional, whilst disorder and fragmentation are the norm. Academic category-building evidently forms part of such temporary ordering, involving also the positionality and normative assumptions of researchers. Still, these categories cannot plainly be reduced to normative implications that would deprive them of any heuristic value. Moreover, their usage is not confined to the academy. Rather, “religion,” “society,” etc. are also being used in public and everyday life, and this on an increasingly global scale (see, e.g., Casanova 2019, esp. 5).

The above considerations suggest two avenues of using and treating “religion” in academic research: one, as a heuristic device and two, as a

historical concept. As a heuristic tool, “religion” still has a fruitful function to play in temporarily ordering segments of past and present reality. It remains crucial to self-reflectively figure in the role of the researcher in creating this order, and delineating segments of reality in the first place, which necessarily are always selective and constructed. Such processes of ordering and understanding do not create, let alone reflect any objective reality, but will resonate with people sufficiently sharing the premises at work in the respective process. (The ascribed identity of researchers plays a role, too, in this regard, but, following the very aim of arriving at categories of meaning that integrate individual instances and perspectives, should be bracketed more than often is the case today.) Such usages of “religion” and their premises differ markedly within the Western academy. This might sound trivial, but deserves mentioning in view of criticism of “*the Western*” concept of religion. What is more, “religion” as a category of academic research is not exclusively Western, neither in its genealogy nor in its present usage.

This brings us to the treatment of “religion” as a historical concept. Such treatment in a way turns a problem into a topic. The *problem* results from the historicity and normativity of the concept of “religion,” which make its universal assumption impossible and its analytical usability problematic. In turn, inquiring into the genealogy and the present reach of “religion” treats this concept as a *topic* of historical research. Such conceptual inquiry provides an alternative to both modernist universalism and postmodern relativism: it acknowledges that historical contingencies did create a lasting conceptual order and consequently enquires into how widely certain concepts are shared (Zemmin and Sievert 2021, esp. 8). The starting point of such historical inquiry is the observation of present global usages of “religion”. The role of academic and political power in shaping the public and global usages and meaning of concepts must neither be denied nor plainly asserted, but rather investigated on a case-to-case basis. This means to attend to the impact of (post-)colonial power, but also to local reservoirs of knowledge in conceptualizations of “religion”. Relatedly, the European academic formation of “religion” was not a self-sufficient affair, but was influenced by non-European contexts and ideas, too, which merits greater attention.

### **Global perspectives: The workshop behind this special issue**

It was with the above background that the workshop from which this special issue evolved was conceived. Entitled “Religion as an Object of

Historical and Social Scientific Study: Global Perspectives,” the workshop took place at the Humanities Center of Advanced Study (HCAS) *Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities* project at the University of Leipzig from November 3–5, 2021.

Basic considerations of the workshop aligned with the overall program of *Multiple Secularities* (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021). Most centrally this concerns the intent to go beyond modernist universalism as well as post-modern particularism in order to discern the multiple configurations of secularity, i.e., conceptual distinctions and structural differentiations between religion and other social spheres, around the globe. “Secularity,” and hence by implication “religion,” here function as heuristic concepts. As such, the historicity of the central concepts used is taken into account; and the multiple configurations of secularity brought into view via a heuristic usage of these concepts provincialize and complexify hegemonic understandings of the secular.

The heuristic starting-point nevertheless reflects a particular research interest and perspective, and inevitably so. From other perspectives, distinctions between religion and social spheres would be understood not as “secularity,” but with different concepts, e.g., “Islam” (Zemmin 2019, esp. 8–11). Whilst having such conceptual alternatives and philosophical or theological perspectives on religion and the secular in mind, this workshop was more specifically interested in the configuration of “religion” as an object of historical and social scientific study. The workshop was thus not interested in case studies using “religion” as a heuristic, let alone analytical concept, but rather in meta-perspectives on usages of religion as an object of study. Such usages, it was our contention, do reflect a particular perspective, which, however, is neither uncontested within the so-called West, nor confined to it.

To be sure, the configuration and disciplining of “religion” as an object of scientific study has its centre of power in European universities, both historically and presently. It fundamentally represents a secular perspective inasmuch as it configures “religion” as one particular object of research next to other, non-religious objects and considers religious doctrines and practices as shaped by historical and social circumstances. However, in European academies and societies, a decidedly secular perspective on religion as an object has also been everything but undisputed. Moreover, as with the concept of “religion” itself, we ought to examine the presence and genealogy of Religious Studies and related disciplines

in a variety of contexts, also beyond the European academy. Hence, this workshop brought together *global perspectives* on how religion is configured and approached as an object of historical and social scientific study, for not only the concept of religion, but also secular theoretical approaches to religion, are increasingly a global affair.

Institutionally, there clearly remains a European and North American centre. This is illustrated by the distribution of the forty-seven national or regional associations that are part of the *International Association for the History of Religions*. Still, in countries in which institutional presence is rather low, the reasons for this are not at all self-evident. Political and economic factors are equally of potential relevance as social and cultural ones, and these factors interact with each other. Societal scepticism against studying religion as a historical and social phenomenon may play a role and prompt particular strategies of historians and social scientists to justify and legitimize their approach within their cultural context. Politically, and especially in authoritarian regimes, social scientists are incited to study certain aspects of religion but not others. Economically, the funding or underfunding of universities and research institutions, and especially the social sciences and humanities, evidently plays a role, too, in the (non-)establishment of the academic study of religion. Thus, the different forms of (not) institutionalizing religion as an object of study in various national and regional contexts around the globe and the factors behind these different forms are worth investigating in greater detail, rather than assuming the presence or absence of a, let alone the, Western perspective.

In addition to its institutional presence, and sometimes because of the difficulties that attempts at institutionalization are facing, historical and social scientific perspectives on religion are also to be found outside of the academy. This is, for example, evident among Marxist intellectuals in Syria of the 1960s, concerning which Max Weiss (2018, 184) coined the expression “disciplinarity without disciplines,” highlighting the fact that they disciplined religion into an object of a societal perspective and contributed to a sociology of religion—yet as public intellectuals, rather than representatives of an academic discipline. A societal perspective on religion, that is, a view on religion primarily from the requirements of society, is even shared by overtly religious scholars and intellectuals, with a twist of their own, of course. This is evident in the case of Islamic reformism since the late nineteenth century (Zemmin 2018). It is important to also keep these non-disciplinary perspectives of religion as an object of

historical and social scientific study in mind, even though this workshop focused decidedly on disciplinary usages.

The interest of the workshop was thus,

in the global presence and characteristics of religion as an object of study in the most pertinent academic disciplines: History of Religion; Comparative Religious Studies; Sociology; Anthropology and Political Science. Central questions concern[ed] the place, status and history of research on religion in these disciplines: What are the main authors, theories and topics? Do academics within these disciplines understand their approach to be secular, and how do they distinguish it from theological approaches? How do they conceptualize “religion” and do they address the question of universality and particularity, or the issue of (de-)colonisation in this regard? In the respective disciplines, which canons and genealogies of the study of religion are constructed? What connections, but also barriers are there between research on religion in different academic contexts? What are the institutional, political and societal conditions facilitating or hindering the establishment and development of the mentioned disciplinary approaches to religion? (Multiple Secularities 2021)

The workshop saw the presentation of eighteen papers, addressing the foregoing and related questions. One third of these papers were developed into contributions to this special issue. Whilst certainly not an arbitrary selection, they are a contingent reflection of the discussions in our workshop, insofar as several other contributions did not come to be included in this issue due to constraints of time. A central dimension that came to be largely absent concerns the institutional presence of scientific approaches to religion in different regional and national contexts, not least China, India, Japan, and Latin America. For researchers working on these, the reader may be directed to the overall programme of the workshop, from which the foregoing quote is taken and which is still visible online, including the abstracts of all contributions.

### **The contributions to this issue**

The six papers included in this issue thus selectively bespeak of the topics and discussions of the workshop, but are, of course, primarily scholarly contributions in their own right. As such, I will mention them here only very briefly and refer the readers to the abstracts of the individual articles for a more detailed summary.

Peter Beyer, in his article on “Religion in the 21st Century: Disciplinary Critique, Global Restructuring, Categorical Diversity,” discusses transfor-

mations in the academic study of religion over the past decades and in relation to societal transformations, not least an increasing pluralization. Whilst providing a broad overview, Beyer focuses on the Sociology of Religion and Religious Studies in the English-speaking academy. Indrek Peedu's contribution on "Dilemmas with Disciplinary Hierarchies and Ideals of Scientific Research in the Study of Religion" compares conceptions of religion in the cognitive science of religion and the comparative history of religion. Peedu points out fundamentally different premises underlying both subfields' conception of religion and assesses the consistency of each.

Armando Salvatore and Kieko Obuse in their intervention, entitled "ReOrienting Religion: An East-West Entanglement," draw attention to Toshihiko Izutsu's conception of religion and language. The Japanese philosopher and scholar of Islam closely collaborated with Wilfred Cantwell Smith and, according to Salvatore and Obuse, both influenced Smith's work and elaborated on it in a most fruitful manner, not least due to him integrating Buddhist sensibilities.

East-West entanglements also play a role in Julian Strube's analysis of "The Emergence of 'Esoteric' as a Comparative Category: Towards a Decentered Historiography." Under an interest in the genealogy of present categories and the discipline of Religious Studies, Strube namely highlights the broad usages of the concept of Esotericism in the eighteenth century, before it was more narrowly identified with a tradition of "Western esotericism." The article shares in a paradigm of Global Religious History, major proponents of which are Julian Strube himself and the author of the subsequent contribution, Giovanni Maltese.

In his present article on "Gender and the Conceptualization of Religion and Islam," Maltese problematizes a disciplinary divide between Religious Studies and Gender Studies. "Religion-making" and "gender-making" ought to be investigated together, Maltese argues, and shows the productiveness of doing so for the related concepts of masculinity, femininity, religion and Islam among Anglophone Muslim intellectuals in Southeast and South Asia at the turn to the 1940s.

Last, but not least, Liudmila Nikanorova asks, "What does Siberian Shamanism do for the Academic Study of Religion?" Closely following the coinage and academic trajectory of "Shamanism," Nikanorova argues that the concept is informed more by colonial scholarship than actual practices and people in Siberia, the imagined region for which it was first coined. Herself born in the Republic of Sakha and now working in the

academic study of religion, Nikanorova is especially perceptive of such discrepancies between emic self-understandings and etic depictions, and her analysis of the usefulness of Shamanism—which she notably does not deny altogether—also speaks to analogous discussions on related scholarly categories.

The category of “religion,” addressed under a variety of angles by all contributions to this issue, for the foreseeable future is here to stay, both in academic and public usages. As part of much wider debates, this issue thus hopes to contribute to fruitful modifications of scholarly conceptions of “religion” in our increasingly plural, but common and globally connected present.

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