

Studying Religion – Concepts, Methods and Dilemmas

My paper aims at addressing some of the problems and challenges faced by the study of religion(s) and at presenting briefly the academic context of that study.

The forming of concepts

Every branch of science works with a set of concepts and terms that convey the framework and the objects of its study. The *History of Religions* or *Religious Studies* is a branch of the humanities that is concerned with the study of religion or rather religions. This immediately brings us to the essential question: what do we mean by ‘religion’. Concepts have their

own history and their first use belongs to a specific culture. Thus, much of our western scholarly terminology has its origins in the Greek and Roman civilizations. The modern concept ‘religion’ is no exception.

The concept is derived from the Latin word *religio* which is difficult to translate in a precise manner but which represents

a fundamental preoccupation with the ancient Romans. *Religio* is mainly expressed in a careful, sometimes meticulous, observance of prescribed rituals. That’s why Cicero could say of the Romans that they are the most ‘religious’ (*religione ... multo superiores*) of all peoples and he defined ‘religion’ as ‘worship of the gods’.¹ Latin writers presented two different etymologies of *religio*. Cicero derived it from the verb *relegere* meaning “to take up again with care” whereas Lactantius (a 4th century Christian writer) related it to the verb *religare* “to tie, to bind”.² The idea of *religio* was taken over by Roman Christianity and transformed into a new concept with much of the same meaning the word ‘religion’ has today in western languages. The Christian concept was shaped in contrast to paganism and *religio* could only apply to the Christian tradition. It was not until in the 17th and 18th centuries that attempts were made to apply the use of the concept also to traditions outside Christianity. In the 19th century, the concept became more widely used to denote religious beliefs and practices of non-European traditions. The concept ‘religion’ is an abstraction, and consequently the object of our study is not religion in itself but the concrete cultural manifestations that we call ‘religions’. The problem of definition apparently remains, however. I will not go into the details of the discussion of defining what religion is but will limit myself to some remarks on the concept itself. Being a modern scholarly construct, the

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1: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II,8.

2: Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II,72 Lactantius, *Div. Inst.*

term ‘religion’ raises the question of its applicability to traditions outside the western world. There is an ongoing discussion on this issue within the discipline.

Human experiences and cultural developments accrue to concepts and categories over a long period of time. Their study is in many ways illuminating. The monumental publication by Reinhart Koselleck and his fellow workers entitled *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (8 volumes, 1972–1997), that is ‘Basic concepts in history’ is indispensable to historians and can also be taken as a model for historians of religions. It investigates the history of some one hundred concepts used in modern political thinking such as ‘state’, ‘liberty’, ‘revolution’, and ‘emancipation’. In the field of religious studies, an analogous work, although with a somewhat different purpose, has actually been published by German scholars under the title *Handbuch Religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (5 volumes 1988–2001). It is more modest in scope, and the choice of concepts treated reveals the opinion of the editors about what is or should be the current terminology. Thus, several traditional concepts such as ‘sacred marriage’ and ‘sacred kingship’ have been discarded or replaced with other concepts judged to be more appropriate.

History of religions and theology

Another concept is *theology* which, in its modern usage, carries different meanings. It denotes for example the academic discipline of ‘theology’ which is mainly devoted to the study of Christianity. A particular issue, sometimes hotly debated, is the relationship between history of religions or religious studies on one hand and theology as an academic discipline on the other. Since the Middle Ages, theology has been an important subject at Western universities and most universities still have faculties of theology. The emergence of history of religions as a discipline of its own can be roughly dated to the late 19th century. If a more precise year must be chosen, it would be 1886, when the *École pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris established a section called *sciences religieuses* devoted entirely to the study of religions. At the same time, the theological faculty at the Sorbonne was shut down. Unlike in most other countries where the history of religions and theology are dealt with by separate institutions, The Netherlands, Denmark, Finland and Sweden have state universities with theological faculties that also include chairs in the history of religions.³ The problem with ‘theology’ in an academic context is that it usually stands in the service of the churches and also includes some normative elements. For example, the elaboration of a good theology for Christians may be one of the tasks of a theological faculty. Academic theology has a strong focus on the interpretation of canonical texts, that is, the Bible, which may cause theological scholars to lose sight of important historical aspects. Thus, to understand fully the religion of the Old Testament, it is necessary to study it in the context of the other religions of the ancient Near East. Similarly, early Christianity must be seen and interpreted as one among the many religions in the Hellenistic-Roman world that flourished during the first centuries of our era.

3: This situation can occasionally be found also in Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Historians of religions study Christianity based on the same premise as other religions. This means, among other things, that the distinction between canonical and non-canonical texts is of less relevance (unless specific questions such as the process of canonization are addressed). Discussion of the different positions taken by the history of religions and theology as academic disciplines should not conceal the fact that the concept of ‘theology’ can be an important category in the general study of religions, provided we are dealing with religions that believe in the category of supernatural beings we call deities.

I suggest we have to look first at the meanings the concept had in its original Greek context in order to find guide lines for its modern scholarly use.

The Greek word *theologia* with the verb *theologeîn* and the noun *theologos* were first used by Plato and Aristotle, but were used more frequently by later authors. The basic meaning of *theologia* is talking or thinking about the gods or God. In a cultic context, *theologia* can be used in the sense ‘praise of a god (or ‘gods’). The verb *theologeîn* denotes the activity that has *theologia* as its result. The noun *theologos* refers primarily to a profession which was associated with religious teaching and rituals. We may note that, unlike *religio*, the use of *theologia* emerged rather late in Greek-speaking Christianity. Sometimes the meaning of *theologia* comes close to that of “religious tradition”.⁴ Finally it can be observed that, in Antiquity, the use of *theologia* was not clearly distinguished from that of *mythologia*. Some uses of ‘theology’ as a general concept in the study of religions are proposed here:

- In accordance with the basic meaning of *theologia* in its Greek context, ‘theology’ denotes ideas, teachings and discourses about deities or a particular deity.
- Second, we may apply ‘theology’ to systematizing interpretations or reworkings of traditional beliefs about gods and goddesses.
- Third, ‘theology’ may be used for systematic elaborations and presentations of the fundamental doctrines of a given religion. In this sense, ‘theology’ usually belongs with a particular type of religions where sacred texts serve as basis for further theological work. Thus, we speak about Jewish, Christian and Islamic theology.
- In some traditions, the foremost Christian and Islamic ‘theology’ may also stand for a religious science.

To sum up the discussion about concepts, the study of religions cannot leave things as they are. It must constantly commit to renewing category formation and to reconsidering established concepts.

Methods

The history of religions is characterized by its multiplicity of methods. A historian of religions makes use of all kinds of materials that are relevant to his or her purpose, written sources, archaeological remains and iconographic materials, oral and visual information. Consequently, methods vary according to the type of source materials and the purpose of a given investigation. In spite of this variety, some methods are more common than others.

4: See for example Josephus, *Apology* I, 78, 225, 237.

Since verbal expression usually conveys a clearer meaning than other types of human activity, and may in addition be preserved over time through written or oral transmission, *philology* stands out as one of the main methods in the discipline. Philology must be taken in a broad sense, including linguistic competence, awareness of text and source critical tools, knowledge of literature and other cultural phenomena as reflected in the texts (also the oral ones).

The *comparative approach* is the hallmark of the history of religions. The terminology and categories we use, such as myth, divination, sacrifice, priests, etc., have been elaborated on the basis of comparisons which aim at bringing out similarities as well as differences. The process of comparison raises many theoretical and methodological problems that are beyond the scope of this article. Making comparisons is a basic act of human cognition and it is also essential in much scholarly work. It is indispensable for historians of religions, particularly when we are faced with the interpretation of religious traditions that have come down to us only fragmentarily, as is the case with the religion of the ancient Scandinavians. Below, I propose some reasons for making cross-cultural comparisons (with special reference to religions of the past that are incompletely known):

- To discern the influence of one tradition upon another.
- To reconstruct a common prototype or to establish some sort of genetic relationship.
- To gain a better understanding of the particular religion or religious phenomenon with which we are primarily concerned.
- To support the ancient origin of myths, ideas or rituals that have been poorly studied or appeared late in the religion studied by pointing out correspondences with earlier, more complete sources from other religions.

Dangers and dilemmas

There are many dangers and dilemmas involved in the study of religions. When dealing with religions outside his or her own cultural sphere, the scholar runs the risk of missing important aspects. This leads to the question of whether it is possible to get a real understanding of a religion without being a believer or practitioner of it. Should we, then, leave the study of Christianity to Christians, Hinduism to Hindus, and Judaism to Jews? A similar dilemma faces the scholar who attempts to create an image of a religion belonging entirely to the past. We are confronted with a world view that is largely irrecoverable, and what we reconstruct may risk being biased and is anyway incomplete. Moreover, our own modern world-view and values cannot be kept out completely, but the awareness of this fact may prevent the historian of religions from making too serious misinterpretations and anachronisms.

Dangers of a more concrete kind may confront the historian of religions. In 2007, a German university professor lecturing on Islam and the Qur'an received a murder threat. The case attracted much attention and led to a vivid debate. Yet the incident is just one of many that have been recorded in connection with the scholarly study of the holy scripture of Islam. It is not just western scholars who are involved. Some years ago, an Egyptian Muslim professor making an attempt at taking a historical-critical approach to the Qur'an was tried in court, judged as an apostate and therefore forced to divorce his wife.

The Qur'an is considered by Muslims to be the pure word of Allah sent down to his prophet Muhammad. As such, it cannot be subject to criticism or to a study of its historical background. This creates a dilemma for historians of religions who want to address the issues of how the Qur'an came into being and about the influences that shaped it. Scholars who work with Islam today tend to avoid taking up such issues and concentrate on other aspects instead. However, historians of religions should not stop short of studying the Qur'an in the same way they study the sacred texts of other religions such as the Bible or the Vedas.

Two more recent finds of utmost importance for the textual history of the Qur'an will renew the interpretation of Qur'an and also reopen the debate on the historical-critical approach to the holy scripture of the Muslims. One is the recovery of the Bergsträsser film archive of Qur'anic manuscripts that was thought to be lost in the turmoil of the Second World War. The evaluation of that archive is in the hands of scholars at Freie Universität in Berlin, i.e. the Corpus Coranicum project.⁵ The other is the sensational find made some time ago in Yemen. During reconstruction work on the great mosque of Sanaa, one of the oldest in the world (built in 628), thousands of Qur'an fragments were discovered. Many of them dated from the 7th century and some were written only fifty years after the death of Muhammad. The task of restoring and combining the fragments has now been completed. The German scholars at the University of Saarbrücken who were responsible for that work estimate that one-fifth of the Qur'an must now be read in a new way.⁶ What is at stake is the ambiguity of the early Arabic script, the so-called *rasm*, which allows for reading the transmitted consonant text in more than one way and which also helps show the underlying Aramaic influence.⁷

Yet the intricate problem of interpretation has only begun and may imply new challenges for the history of religions. In my opinion, the nature of the Qur'an as the last important document of Late Antiquity religious traditions will appear more clearly and lead to a reconsideration of the origins of Islam.⁸

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5: Corpus Coranicum – Textdokumentation und Kommentar zum Koran; for further information see <http://www.bbaw.de/Forschung/Forschungsprojekte/Coran/de>

6: For the find and its signification, see Ohlig & Puin 2005.

7: See also Luxenberg 2000.

8: This would be along the lines proposed by historians of religions already in the first half of the 20th cent., such as Tor Andrae and Geo Widengren.