One of the most striking phenomena in teaching the study of religions as a discipline is that the students accept the material presented and obviously have a vague idea of what is taught, without ever asking what is meant by “religion”. It seems that this term is, like some others such as music or literature, somehow understood without any explicit definition that clarifies what the subject taught is about. Problems of definition arise only when, in the field of theories, definitions of religion are discussed. Then suddenly students encounter problems of understanding and start a discourse on religion as a concept as well as on the methodology that should be employed to study it properly. Consequently, in the following both elements of the discourse will be briefly presented. The aim of this examination is to gain a better understanding of current debates on both issues and to know both what the problems are and why most of the arguments about these problems must remain unsettled.

1. Religion as a concept

1.1. Ways to define religion

The term “religion” as a label for different worldviews, such as Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism, came into use during the Enlightenment. Previously it was common to speak in medieval Western Christianity of Islam, for example, in terms of “lex” (law) or “secta” (sect).¹ No definition justified such a labelling as “religion”. This was a preacademic way of labelling and led to a wide range of cultural heritages of all continents being called “religions” in Western languages. This became particularly important in the 19th century when more and more text material and results of field study of different cultures were brought to the attention of Western scholars, with the result that it became clear that Western theology dealing mainly with the Judeo-Christian tradition was not sufficient to embrace such an enormous amount of data. A new discipline was needed to embrace study of these ideas and practices. This gave birth to the study of religions as a discipline making discoveries about religious history on a

¹ Cf. on this Ernst Feil: Religio, 4 vols., Göttingen 1986-2007
One of the results of the documentation of these discoveries was the publication of the series of “Sacred Books of the East”, edited in 50 volumes by the Oxford Professor of Sanscrit Friedrich Max Müller. This series not only contained Indian texts, such as the Vedanta-Sutras, the Upanishads and the laws of Manu, but also included among its volumes Chinese texts of Confucianism and Daoism in English translation, as well as an English translation of the Koran. It showed that the Asian religious heritage was very rich in thought and perspectives and thus was a challenge to claims of superiority made on the behalf of Christianity. As such, its impact was felt in India where until today, for instance, Max Müller, a German by birth and education, is so highly respected that the German language institutes there are not called, as in other countries, “Goethe Institut”, but rather “Müller Institut”.

For the study of religions as a discipline such a general use of the label “religion” led to inquiry into and discussion of what is common to all the cultural traditions found in the “Sacred Books of the East”. What have the Hindu laws of Manu in common with the Chinese Books of the Rites? And moreover, to what an extent is it legitimate to categorise these laws of Manu under the label of religion and not, as could also legitimately be done, under the label of “law” or “jurisprudence”. Or should the Indian Ajurveda really be labelled as “religion”, or is it not rather a sort of “alternative medicine”? To see this discussion in a more practical way it suffices to enter one of the major bookshops in Western cities today and notice that, for instance, books by the Dalai Lama can be found under the section for “religion”, while others are filed under “esotericism”, “Eastern Wisdom”, “Alternative Medicine” or “Astrology”. If we compare bookshops, we will find that in some cases one and the same book may be found in different sections. The same applies to Classical authors as well. Likewise, one may find poems of the Persian mystic Rumi (d. 1273) under “Religion” or “Islamic mysticism”, as well as under “Literature” or “Poetry”. The question therefore is: how do we know that all this is “religion”; what justifies our classification of such works under “religion”?

Some may suggest that the etymology of the Western term “religion” could help. The word is indeed used in many Western languages (though not in all!). Its use is common in everyday language without any clear definition as a basis. However, as concerns its etymology, we have

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3 For instance, it is not used in Dutch. The corresponding term in the Netherlands is “godsdienst”, i.e. a service to God, thus indicating a strong reference to God as the leading concept.
at least two different explanations, which are both authentic.\textsuperscript{4} One is given by the Roman orator Cicero (d. 43 B.C.), who says that the noun “\textit{religio}” is derived from the verb “\textit{rēlēgere}”, i.e. “to gather together” or “to collect again”. The second is found in the work of the Christian writer Lactantius (d. ca. 320 A.D.), who claims a derivation from \textit{rēligare}, i.e. “to bind back or behind, to rebind”. Each derivation is not a pure accident but closely related to the author’s own understanding of religion. Cicero, who practiced Roman religion, emphasized the repetitive character of the ritual, one of the most significant characteristics of traditional Roman religion. Lactantius, as a Christian, explained religion as a reference, a rebinding, to God, so that here again the main characteristics of the Christian understanding of religion are put forward. It is no surprise that in later times and up to the present the Christian concept has lorded it over the pagan explanation in the West. This short remark regarding the etymology of the term suggests already that its use is problematic as soon as it comes to non-European concepts.

A look at the major religious traditions, such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, reveals that corresponding terms in these traditions open new perspectives and show that only in parts is there an overlapping concept. It suffices to look at respective dictionaries when translating “religion”. The result is that the English-Arabic dictionaries suggest “\textit{dīn}” and the English-Sanskrit dictionaries offer “\textit{dharma}” as corresponding terms.\textsuperscript{5} “\textit{Dīn}”, however, is mainly used for Islam alone as the \textit{true religion}, while other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are usually called “\textit{diyānāt}”, a plural form of “\textit{diyāna}”, a word derived from the same root as “\textit{dīn}” yet different from it in meaning and use. The true religion can be seen as being of the same lineage as all the celestial (i.e. revelation-based) pre-Islamic religions such as Judaism and Christianity, but it must be distinguished from other forms of religious thought found in human history. One of the leading elements in the concept of “\textit{dīn}” is its being linguistically related to the Day of Judgment as expressed in the Fātiha, the first Surat of the Koran, where God is referred to as “\textit{mālik yaum ad-dīn}”, i.e. Master of the Day of Judgment. If this concept is applied to other religions, it would suppose that reference to the Day of Judgment is somehow included in the creed of these religions. Otherwise it is hardly possible to use the


term for them. A similar problem would arise with “dharma”. Here, the order of the world and concepts of rule are at the centre of the word’s meaning. In this sense it is broader than our normal understanding of religion, which does not embrace the idea of a worldly order but God, while the Hindu concept does not make any reference to God or gods. All this reveals, in short, that each term is appropriate for its own cultural context but is problematic as soon as it is extended to others.

Etymology and a look at corresponding terms in other cultural contexts do not help to settle the problem of definition. Religion needs to be defined directly, without any linguistic or intercultural backing up. There are two ways to do this: either a definition with reference to the contents of belief or a definition with regard to its function for the believer. Commenting on Leuba’s list of definitions of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith concludes that religion “can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways.”

1.2. Religion defined with reference to the contents of belief

Up to the 1960s it was very common to define religion with reference to the contents of belief. Relying on Lactantius’ etymological definition, religion was often presented as a belief in God, a kind of re-binding of the human being to his/her origin, namely the divine creator, so that the practice of religion became the responding answer to God’s appeal to the human being. Such an understanding of religion was based on God as the real focus of religion. It seemed at the same time precise and narrow because it had God in the centre and was hardly applicable to polytheistic forms of religion, unless the definition was widened to include beliefs in gods and goddesses as well. Impersonal forms of the divine were then still excluded, so it was a great step forward when Rudolf Otto, in 1912, published his book on The Holy, thus concentrating on a more general understanding of the divine. This explains the enormous success of his book at a time when, moreover, phenomenology became the new approach to metaphysics in philosophy. The phenomenology of religion followed immediately and suggested that religion is the encounter of the human being with the holy or the manifestation of the holy, i.e. hierophania, to use Mircea Eliade’s favoured term.

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6 James H. Leuba: A Psychological Study of Religion. Its origin, function, and future, New York 1969 (Reprint of the 1912 ed.) where Leuba has a collection of definitions annotated with comments in an appendix pp. 339-363, distinguishing three categories of definitions: 1. Intellectualistic point of view (pp. 339-346), 2. Affectivistic point of view (pp. 346-351), and 3. Voluntaristic or practical point of view (pp. 352-361)

The main focus of such an understanding of religion is the holy – be it personal or impersonal. Religious experience is defined as the encounter of the human being with this. Discourse about the holy is consequently, in the phenomenology of religion, very similar to that found in theology. Friedrich Heiler can therefore state that the study of religions is somehow a kind of theology, insofar as it has to do not only with psychological or historical phenomena of the human being but also with metaphysical realities. To do this properly requires a special capacity, which is similar to that of understanding music, namely a sort of “musicality” in the field of religion. Whoever lacks this is incapable of having access to this kind of knowledge, so that religious knowledge is a special category of knowledge, *sui generis*. Rudolf Otto, therefore, in his book on *The Holy*, makes the suggestion that a reader who has no “musicality” in religion should not continue reading the book.

Reference to metaphysical realities is difficult to associate with Buddha’s original teachings as interpreted by the Theravada school. The holy has no role in this. Therefore a definition without any metaphysical implication would be better. Paul Tillich’s definition of religion as “ultimate concern” seems to satisfy this need, but it does not indicate how to distinguish religion from other commitments; some people make believe that for them money or football are ultimate concerns. The application of Tillich’s definition in the study of religions would consequently enormously widen the range of possible subjects but make it unclear where the borderline between religion and non-religion is to be drawn.

The focus on metaphysical realities and on the necessity of a kind of musicality in the field of religion provoked harsh criticisms in the 1970s. The phenomenology of religion was attacked as *crypto-theology*, which could not be tolerated as an academic discipline in modern universities. The argument was that both metaphysical realities and musicality were impossible to assess using intersubjective verification and therefore unacceptable as requirements for academic research. The consequence of these criticisms was an anthropological turn towards the believer instead of the contents of belief. The radical change in perspective is expressed by Hartmut Zinser when he says that the contents of theology is God, while the contents of the study of religions is the human being who believes in God. Consequently, no claims of truth are made; what is of interest is the believer and the contents of belief insofar as it has an influence on the believer’s thinking, moral standards and practical

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behaviour.\textsuperscript{9} Opponents of such an anthropological turn say that such an approach reduces religion to a purely human phenomenon. They therefore speak of reductionism as concerns the metaphysical realities that, according to these opponents, are characteristic of every religious belief.\textsuperscript{10}

In its concretisation the anthropological turn goes along with radical constructivism\textsuperscript{11} insofar as the influence of world views on human beings are investigated, whatever truth those world views may represent. From this perspective the study of contents and of the mechanism of its application for human conduct comes close to what religion is with regard to its functions for the believer.

1.3. Religion defined with regard to its functions for the believer

The anthropological turn is, in the study of religions, embedded in a general academic setting that since the 1970s has put more emphasis on sociology and psychology, as well as on the political sciences, than on metaphysics-orientated philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that studies of the influence of religion on individuals and societies have increased in number while those on specific deities have decreased. Consequently, empirical investigation and field work research have become more and more important and filled a gap to which the more text-orientated studies of former times paid less attention.

The theories on religion expressed by Karl Marx and the Marxists have gained importance, as have those put forward by Emile Durkheim, Niklas Luhmann, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, to mention only the most prominent thinkers. Moreover, the theoretical debate concentrated on secularization as the future development model world-wide, representing a significant reduction in the importance of religion in modern societies and its restriction to the private sphere of the individual, with the public sphere of politics, economics and arts becoming more and more independent from any religious influence. Numerous examples of empirical data have been collected to prove or disprove these theories.

\textsuperscript{9} Hartmut Zinser: Grundfragen der Religionswissenschaft, Paderborn et al. 2010 pp. 21ff, in particular p. 26


\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Ernst von Glasersfeld: Radical Constructivism. A Way of Knowing and Learning, London 1995, in particular the first and the last chapter of the book
Interdisciplinary research has led to the importation of theories from other disciplines. One of the most influential theories in the study of religions has come from cultural anthropology. It follows Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion. He defines religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.12

Such a definition allows us to study all elements of belief without any reference to their truth, but it does not exclude truth either. That is why the reductionist argument does not hold true; because those studies leave the question of true or false open, they neither disprove it nor do they prove it.

Geertz’ definition places religion in the much broader frame of culture. Hence Bruce Lincoln is right in saying that “‘culture’ often refers both to a group of people and to some X the group shares, which defines them [i.e. the group of people] in the same moment they define it. I want to […] give more serious attention to the question of what this X is”.13 He clarifies his position by adding: “I understand lower-case-c culture as the sum of all communications circulating within a group that the group recognizes as its own, and through which it constitutes itself and distinguishes itself from others. Capital C Culture is a highly significant subset of this totality.”14 In other words: “To use Gramscian terms, capital C Culture is nothing other than hegemony, and the remainder of lower-case-c culture is that which hegemony seeks to suppress, contain and devalue.”15 Consequently, one may conclude from this discourse about religion and culture with the words of Mark Hulsether: “culture is an umbrella category with religious culture as a subset.”16 To identify one with the other is no solution, for there are different religions in one and the same culture, as is the case with Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle East, and there are religions such as Christianity and Islam that are practiced in different cultural settings. Moreover, if religion

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14 Ibid. p. 412
15 Ibid. P. 413
can hardly be defined to the satisfaction of all scholars, then this problem also holds true, possibly even more so, for an eventual definition of culture.

2. Methodology in the Study of Religions

In the previous paragraph it was said that the requirement of “musicality” has since the 1970s been strongly criticised, being refuted as an appropriate method for the study of religions. Moreover, Geo Widengren put the argument to the test insofar as he compared the research results of two scholars with their respective religiousness. One was the German Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke, who introduced the historical method to the chronology of the verses of the Koran. His work, by a scholar who certainly was not very religious, revolutionized Western studies of Koran. The second scholar was Nathan Söderblom, first professor of the study of religions at the University of Leipzig and afterwards Archbishop of Uppsala in Sweden. His book on Muhammad goes in no way beyond what Muslim sources say. Widengren concluded that, at least in this comparison, one can state that religiosity is no guarantor of a greater insight into a religion.17 The same is true for Max Weber, who said of himself that he had no musicality in religion.18 Consequently, one can say that comparing the study of religions with that of music is misleading. On the contrary, one could more easily compare it with the study of medicine, where the researcher does not need to have had the disease that he or she is researching. No doubt those who have had the disease may have new insights of understanding, but these are irrelevant for research because they cannot be submitted to intersubjective verification.

The debate on methods in the study of religions has always concentrated on the question of whether or not there is a specific method that is typical of the discipline’s approach and not common to other disciplines. The scholars of the classical phenomenology of religion argue that this method is that of phenomenology of religion based on the researcher’s own “musicality”. It declares religion to be a field *sui generis* and therefore located outside the normal academic circles.

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The opponents of classical phenomenology of religion insist instead on methods that are shared with other disciplines. Michael von Brück\(^{19}\) clearly states that there is no specific method in the study of religions. What is specific are the questions asked by scholars in the discipline. He indicates three specific types of questions: functional, hermeneutic, and comparatist.

Functional questions, von Brück says, avoid imposing structures and judgements of value on truth tests. They instead are interested in knowing the function and influence of those assumptions, discourses and institutions for societies that are explicitly or implicitly marked by them.

Hermeneutic questions concentrate on the semantics of cultural expressions from the perspective of mutual relationships between the individual and the local community to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of changes in constituting and reformulating individual and social identities.

Comparatist perspectives produce phenomenological typologies and thus open the way for understanding specific characteristics by distinguishing them from general concepts in cultural contexts. They thus show that those typologies are never static but need always to be explained through historical processes.

Notwithstanding these important questions it is true that research work must be based on philological, historical, and socio-empirical methods to be successful and acceptable in academic circles. Truth claims cannot be satisfied on the basis of these methods and must therefore be excluded from academic research in the discipline. This is not an excuse for any kind of reductionism but a necessity if the results need to be submitted to intersubjective verification.

Conclusion

The previous paragraphs have showed that there is no definition of “religion” that would be acceptable to all scholars in the study of religions as a discipline. Neither etymology nor a look at corresponding terms in other cultures is helpful in defining “religion”. A definition

\(^{19}\) Michael von Brück: Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft, in Anne Koch (Ed.): Watchtower Religionswissenschaft. Standortbestimmungen im wissenschaftlichen Feld, Marburg 2007 pp. 73-93
with reference to the contents of belief encounters a lot of difficulties if one wishes to keep all religions recognized as such on the agenda. A reduction of the subject of study to the functions of religion for the believer is opposed as being overly reductionist by some defenders of classical phenomenology of religion. They require, instead, a kind of “musicality” in the field of religion as an appropriate way of understanding “religion”. Modern scholars in the discipline argue against saying that such research cannot be accepted in an academic discipline because it would exclude research results from intersubjective verification. Therefore they wish to insist on methods shared by other disciplines as well; only the questions asked advance the specific interest of the discipline.

Keywords:
Religion, definitions of religion, methodology in the study of religions, “musicality” in the field of religion, reductionism

Abstract

This article examines the specific problems encountered when defining “religion”. It demonstrates that all definitions that start from the contents of belief are unsatisfactory because they are either too narrow or too wide to embrace all the traditional religions studied in the discipline and nothing else. Therefore it is nowadays more common to study the functions of religion for the believer. Opponents of this view argue that such a limitation of research interests is excessively reductionist and advocate for the study of religion sui generis. The majority of scholars in the field today, however, state that there is no specific methodology in the study of religions. What is specific is the interest taken in particular questions. The results of research must in any case be submittable to intersubjective verification if the study of religions is to be an academic discipline among others in the university.

Η έννοια της «θρησκείας» στο γνωστικό πεδίο της Σπουδής των Θρησκειών

Περίληψη

Στο άρθρο αυτό εξετάζονται τα ιδιαίτερα προβλήματα που ανακύπτουν κατά τον προσδιορισμό του όρου «θρησκεία». Υποστηρίζεται σε αυτό ότι όλοι οι ορισμοί που έχουν ως βάση για τη δημιουργία τους μόνο το περιεχόμενο της θρησκευτικής πίστης δεν είναι ικανοποιητικοί, γιατί είναι είτε πολύ στενοί, είτε πολύ ευρείς, για να περιλάβουν όλες τις
παραδοσιακές θρησκείες που μελετώνται στο πλαίσιο του γνωστικού αντικειμένου της μελέτης της θρησκείας, και τίποτε περισσότερο.

Ως εκ τούτου σήμερα είναι περισσότερο σύνηθες να μελετά κανείς τις λειτουργίες που προσφέρει η θρησκεία στον πιστό. Οι αντιτιθέμενοι σε αυτή την άποψη υποστηρίζουν ότι μια τέτοια οριοθέτηση των ενδιαφερόντων της έρευνας είναι υπερβολικά περιοριστική και συνηγορεί στη μελέτη της θρησκείας ως ενός sui generis φαινομένου. Η πλειονότητα όμως των επιστημόνων που ασχολούνται σήμερα στο πεδίο αυτό δηλώνουν ότι δεν υπάρχει μια ειδική μεθοδολογία για τη μελέτη των θρησκειών.

Το ιδιαίτερο σε κάθε περίπτωση έρευνας, είναι το ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον που έχει ο ερευνητής θέτοντας συγκεκριμένα επιμέρους ερωτήματα. Τα αποτελέσματα όμως της έρευνας αυτής πρέπει να μπορούν να αποτελέσουν στη διαδικασία της αντικειμενικής επαλήθευσης, εάν η μελέτη των θρησκειών πρόκειται να είναι ένα ακαδημαϊκό γνωστικό αντικείμενο μεταξύ των άλλων στο πανεπιστήμιο.

**Autobiographical note:**

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