



*Historiography of Religion: New approaches to origins of narrating a religious past.* Norrköping, Sweden: Jörg Rüpke / Susanne Rau, University of Erfurt, 10.09.2012-14.09.2012.

Reviewed by Bernd-Christian Otto

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## Historiography of Religion: New approaches to origins of narrating a religious past

The research conference, generously funded by a conference grant of the European Science Foundation, and hosted by the University of Linköping (LiU), focused on the question: 'How, under which conditions and with which consequences are religions historicized?'. It aimed at furthering the study of religion as of historiography by analysing how religious groups (or their adversaries) employ historical narratives in the construction of their identities. Likewise it asked how such groups were invented by later historiography and are continued in modern research. Thus it also focused on the biases and elisions of current analytical and descriptive frames. Combining disciplinary competences of Religious Studies and History of Religion, Confessional Theologies, History, History of Science, and Literary Studies, the participants initiated a comparative historiography of religion.

Numerous scholars from different fields of historical and religious research, from Circum-Mediterranean and European as well as Asian religious traditions from the first millennium BCE to the present came together. The conference was structured by a series of six sessions in three days (including one poster session) which combined impulses from short (10 minutes) and long (20 minutes) lectures with plenary discussions. Here, the impulse of the initial question was driven forward by further questions developed in the opening lecture by the organizers like "Which contexts do provoke processes of historicization and the development of historiography in particular?"; "Which practices to historicize the past, that is to acknowledge and sequence the pastness of the past, have been used in historicizing religions?"; "How

do religions make themselves immune against historicist claims? "

The conference programme included some 26 papers focusing on the above-mentioned questions and covered a variety of topics and religious traditions (see below). A poster session offered the opportunity to present case studies as contributions to the other sessions. It was used by nearly 20 young scholars. Alongside the paper and poster sessions, a significant amount of time was reserved for discussion, partly after the talks and panels, partly during the common lunch and dinner meetings and the final discussion at the end of the conference.

The questions addressed in the sessions contributed to three basic axes of research.

### 1 Origins and developments

JOHANNES BRONKHORST (Lausanne) dealt with ancient Indian Brahmanism and focused on the Indian pattern of de-historicization present in the doctrine of 'yugas' (world ages). Bronkhorst presented an exception to this pattern in a text called 'Kali purana' which significantly curtailed the (typically very large) timeframe of the 'Kali yuga' and proposed the hypothesis that the authors felt in fact living close to the end of the world. Systematically the talk and its discussion led to the question whether the failing of prophecy might be an important instigations for historiography by religious agents.

INGVILD GILHUS (Bergen) introduced the concept of living literature and analyzed the collection of texts in the codex Nag Hammadi II. The phenomenon of an ad-

ditional temporal framing before biblical origins and in the very end points to an elite establishing its status by specialist knowledge. Within this frame, interest is in permanency, not change; the intensive historicisation of heresiographic literature in the form of genealogies is countered by a lack of names and events.

CHASE ROBINSON (New York) started from the notion of history as a repository of knowledge claims based on plausibility, a criterion that has to be historicized itself. Initial Islamic historiography, starting in the second Islamic century, legitimated the Quran by connecting it with the man Muhammad as the prophet, sketched in the genre of biography. The prophet is the locus of historicisation, for instance in construing a “*translatio imperii*” to the Muslim community. In comparison, non-prophetic biographies are formulaic and serial.

SYLVIE HUREAU (Paris) presented her work on medieval Chinese Buddhist hagiographies and proposed a two-fold hypothesis: (1) that the miraculous events in these biographies are not arbitrary but illustrate typical patterns of Indian Buddhist sutras known to the readers at that time; (2) that these texts adapted Indian narrative patterns to a Chinese context.

PER K. SØRENSEN (Leipzig) gave a survey on medieval Tibetan historiography, separating five typical historiographic genres: annals, genealogy, register of sources, ‘origins of the dharma’, and apocryphal ‘treasure literature’. While discussing the different institutional and functional contexts of these genres, Sørensen stressed their relative homogeneity and the quick dissolution of their boundaries. Thus, it proved to be more fruitful to analytically distinguished ‘inner’, ‘outer’ and ‘secret’ as narrative patterns in these sources.

PEKKA TOLONEN (Turku) traced back the textual sources on the origins of the medieval European Waldensian movement and presented six texts from 1174 to the 1360s that adopted very different narrative and ideological patterns while dealing with the movement. In their quest for origins, Protestant historiography later based its judgment of the Waldensian movement and Peter Waldes on the two motifs of sanctity of the founder and apostolic origins in these early accounts.

YVES KRUMENACKER (Lyon) analyzed French Protestant historiography of the 17th century as a sort of texts answering the question “Where was your church before Luther’s and Calvin’s reformation?” The heuristic apparatus developed included dogmatic inventions or critique before 1500, individuals who spread new ideas,

and the continuity of groups from Apostolic times onwards. The contribution demonstrated the role of narratives of martyrdom for the historiography of groups that remained defeated minorities in their struggle with French Catholicism and the importance of historiography for a specific Protestant identity.

## 2 Writing histories

ULRIKA MÅRTENSSON (Trondheim) presented a paper on the medieval Arab historian at-Tabari. She discussed his interpretation of the appearance of the Qur’an as a godly reaction to a former breach of contract and advocated a more elaborate scholarly reception of at-Tabari in order to understand early Islam. For the general question of religion being confronted with history, her demonstration showed important differences in the treatment of the Quran by one and the same author, but in the different genres of history and Quranic commentary.

SHAHZAD BASHIR (Stanford) focused on the Early Modern Persian historian Muhammad Khwandamir and his massive work *Habib as-siyar*. He described the different layers and historiographical subjects of the text and particularly focussed on the different representation of Islamic, Persian, and Mongol history. From an analytical point of view it was interesting to see how sensitive the chronicler is of how to produce meaning.

JON KEUNE (Göttingen) presented his work on the West Indian Hindu movement of ‘Varkari sampraday’ and discussed aspects of its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. He stressed the problem of writing a history of this movement as the sources – written by practitioners, opponents, and others – tend to instrumentalize this development within different cultural and narrative (that is polemical) patterns.

Even more attention to the practitioners of historiography was given by SUSANNE RAU (Erfurt). Historiography is a tool for creating purpose and identity, but religion is always involved in many purposes, from embedding local history into the history of salvation to offering actual and virtual experiences within the framework of education of a prince. Additionally, the narratives are usually written by individuals (not groups), hardly full-time academics before 1650, frequently priests or preachers.

In the context of historiography in the confessional age HANNAH SCHNEIDER (Paris) narrowed the focus down to outright polemics in the 19th century. She iden-

tified important topoi in the narrative proper – for example the topos of talking about the government of the churches offered space for advancing or criticizing the infallibility of the pope – or in paratext like mottos on title pages – “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.

Against this background FRANZISKA METZGER (Fribourg) developed a tool-box for analyzing an entangled history of religion, history, and the nation. She pointed out that attention must be paid to the amalgamation of different discursive fields (dealing with region or religion for instance), to processes of sacralisation in certain discourses (even of science), and of different communicative communities: of memory, of knowledge, of generations. Paying attention to meta-narratives and discourses about methodology helps to achieve this aim, for example to explain the dominance of the religious factor in national-liberal and catholic narratives in the 19th century.

Making fruit of the comparative approach of the conference, PHILIPP HETMANCZYK (Zürich) pointed to similar entanglements in the early 20th century’s engagement with the factor of religion in accounts of the economic development of China. Here, Confucian ancestor worship could be seen as mirroring feudal structures or hindering the accumulation of capital, even if Confucianism could be seen as inspiring a productive economic ethos in other accounts.

### 3 Transforming narratives: scholars, methods, disciplines

In the last section, dedicated to the establishment of modern disciplines, CRISTIANA FACCHINI (Bologna) analyzed the history of the historicization of Judaism from the 17th century onwards, programmatically going beyond the usual starting point of the 19th century when dealing with historic disciplines. In following the reception of the seemingly antiquarian account of Jewish ritual by Leon of Modena (publ. 1637/38) the influence of far-ranging historical comparisons, the influence of small networks, and the failure of political projects and its fatal consequences became apparent.

RENÉE KOCH-PIETTRE (Paris) discussed the 18th century European scholar Charles de Brosses, particularly focussing on his work *Du culte des dieux fétiches*. She stressed Charles de Brosses’ innovative approach in interpreting ancient polytheism by describing his usage of the concept of ‘fétichisme’ that has been adopted by various later scholars.

GABRIELLA GUSTAFSSON (Uppsala) exemplified

mechanism of ancient as well as modern historiographical distortions by showing the gradual transformation of verbal ideographic accounts in early narratives (e.g. *evocare*, ‘they called out the god’) into abstract and generalizing nouns (*evocatio*, ‘the calling out of gods’), suggestive of established and formalized rituals.

REINHARD G. KRATZ (Göttingen) added an important facet to the conference’s results by discussing the reconcilability of historical method and belief. He followed the tenet of scholarship destructing the *historia sacra* and this being an attack on religion from Julius Wellhausen onwards and analyzed its historiographical roots. On this basis he developed a hermeneutical approach that asks to a) realize how irrational elements of ‘sacred history’ are articulated in religious traditions, starting from textual conjectures in the biblical tradition, and b) to historicise ‘modern’ scholarship itself. Here, he converged with many other contributions who had shown the high methodological standards of supposedly ‘pre-critical’ scholarship.

GIOVANNI FILORAMO (Torino), finally, contributed a paper that contextualised the establishment of chairs of “History of Christianity” as a replacement for the discipline of “Church History” in Italian Universities from the late 19th century onwards within the discussion of the substantial or merely accidental character of historical change in matters religious.

The results of research presented in talks and posters demonstrated that the research question informing the conference is highly productive. New interpretations and perspectives were generated for many texts or textual traditions. The seemingly anachronistic and Eurocentric application of the term ‘historiography’ to widely different religions and texts in past and contemporary societies proved hermeneutically successful in introducing new perspectives into pre-modern and non-Western traditions as well as breaking down notions of ‘pragmatic historiography’ or ‘modern scholarship’. Thus, the participants initiated a comparative historiography of religion by applying literary comparison and historical contextualization to those texts that have been used as central documents for histories of individual religions and by analyzing their historiographic character, tools and strategies. The questions addressing the tensions between orientation by a history and critical plurality of historiographic voices as well as the tensions between continuities of historiographic techniques and claims to qualitatively different scholarship proved irresolvable, and hence fruitful, as these tensions are informed by and

indicate larger issues of human culture and its observation, permanency and change.

“Historiography of Religion: New Approaches to origins of narrating a religious past” has proven crucial in establishing a new field of research that forces scholarship to integrate historiographic reflections of the participating disciplines with a fresh look onto the classical textual “sources” of any historical reconstruction of religious practices and ideas. Three issues will be of special relevance in the near future. a) A history of historical research on religion was stimulated by identifying key steps in the early modern and modern history of research. For disciplines adherent to the paradigm of “History of Religion” historiography will move from a special field on the margins of the relevant discipline to the center of methodological reflection with the next decade. b) At the same time it will contribute to an already visible shift in other fields, that is, the reinvigoration of comparative approaches, including the more complex notions of transfer and entanglement. On the basis of the permanent recreation of group boundaries in historiographic accounts, the concept of individual “religions” will be seriously questioned as ordering principle of research. Here, the entanglement of religion, region, language, and historiography has to be critically re-evaluated as is the case in national history or national literature. Finally, c) focusing on the practices of historiography enables a more complex analysis of the interplay of collective meta-narratives and shared ethos with individual agenda and appropriations. Here, religious studies will have to approach relevant sciences as well as tap hermeneutical techniques as developed by anthropological, literary and media studies.

#### Conference Overview:

Welcome Address: Susanne Rau / Jörg Rüpke, University of Erfurt, DE

#### *Historiographic texts and contexts*

1. *Which contexts do provoke processes of historicization and the development of historiography in particular?*

Johannes Bronkhorst (University of Lausanne, CH): The historiography of Brahmanism

Chase Robinson (City University of New York, US): History and Heilsgeschichte in early Islam

Susanne Rau (University of Erfurt, DE): Practitioners of religious historiography

Ingvild Gilhus (Bergen, NO): The invention of iden-

tity and the creation of history as cosmic myth: Interpreting Codex II from Nag Hammadi

#### 2. *Writing histories of religion*

Franziska Metzger (University of Fribourg, CH): Conflicting historiographical claims in religiously plural societies

Yvonne Maria-werber (Lund University, SE): Religion and Gender in Scandinavian historiography

#### 3. *Poster session*

4. *Which practices to historicize the past, i.e. to acknowledge and sequence the pastness of the past, have been used in historicizing religions?*

Reinhard Gregor Kratz (University of Göttingen, DE): Historia sacra and Historical Criticism in Biblical Scholarship

#### *Thematic round table and short talks*

Shahzad Bashir (Stanford University, US): Islamic, Persian, and Mongol Times in Early Modern Persianate Historiography

Ulrika Mårtensson (NTNU-The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NO): How medieval Muslim historical writings can further contemporary research into the historical origins of the Qur’an

Pekka Tolonen (University of Turku, FI): Construction of the origins of a heresy: medieval narrative sources on the origins of the Waldensian movement in context

Yves Krumenacker (Université de Lyon, FR): French Protestantism and the use of History

Hannah Schneider (German Historical Institute Paris, FR): “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” – inter-confessional polemics in French church histories of the 19th century

5. *How does historicization modify certain characteristics of religions? How do they integrate a historical dimension? How do religions make themselves immune against historicist claims?*

Per K. Sørensen (University of Leipzig, DE): Tibetan Historiography: A survey

Anders Klostergaard Petersen (University of Aarhus, DK): Presentification of history

#### *Thematic round table and short talks*

Jon Keune (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, DE): *The Conditions of Historicizing Religion: Hinduism, Social Change, and Regional Identity in Western India*

Madlen Krueger (Ruhr-University Bochum University, DE): *Narration of Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*

Philopp Hetmanczyk (University of Zurich, CH): *Economic Histories of Religion in China*

Eimer O'Brien (National College of Art and Design, Dublin, IE): *The Art of Narrative: Religious Identity in Modern Ireland*

6. *How did different disciplines dealing with religion take up the impulse of historicism?*

*Thematic round table and short talks*

Aliki Theochari (University of Athens, GR): *Pagans or Christians in Late Antiquity? Construction of identity and polemic: the case of Eunapius of Sardis*

Sylvie Hureau (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, FR): *Reading sutras in biographies*

Assia Maria Harwazinski (Tuebingen University, DE): *Cinema and Islam: Reconstruction and Presence of History in Arabic Cinema*

Cristiana Fachini (University of Bologna, IT): *Jewish Studies, Identity shaping by scientific Historiography*

Giovanni Filoramo (University of Torino, IT): *History of Christianity, Church history and storia delle religioni*

*Thematic round table and short talks*

Gabriella Gustafsson (Uppsala University, SE): *Verbs, nouns, temporality and typology*

Renée Koch-Pietre (CNRS - Centre ANHIMA, FR): *How to consider polytheism as a valuable religion: Charles de Brosses and his "fétiches"*

Darja Sterbenc Erker (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, DE): *Historicizing religion in ancient Rome: emic and "etic" accounts*

Forward Look Session

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