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Author: Rüpke, Jörg
Title: "Creating Religion(s) by Historiography"

Published in: Archiv für Religionsgeschichte: ARG
Berlin: de Gruyter

Volume: 20 (1)

Year: 2018

Pages: 3 - 6

ISSN: 1868-8888

Persistent Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1515/arege-2018-0999>

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Jörg Rüpke

Creating Religion(s) by Historiography

To narrate one's past is one of the most important tools to define one's identity. This holds true for individuals in genealogies or conversion narratives as well as for groups and nations, bolstering their coherence and claims by national histories. Religious groups use similar tools, as recent research has stressed.¹ Given the lack or rudimentary state of religious organization, the lack of membership concepts, the contested character of orthodoxy and heresy, phenomena of 'civil religion' or widely shared practices and beliefs in many regions and epochs, the definition of the subject of a history is of paramount importance. A history of religion of the people living in the Netherlands is different from a history of Christianity in the Netherlands and much more so from the history of the religious groups based on the confession of Dordrecht (1632, Mennonites); a history of Christendom is different from a history of religion in the West—and much more so from a history of the one and holy Church. It is by the very narrating of origins, conflicts, exclusions and alliances that the identity of the narratives' subjects, their characteristics and boundaries are defined. This is as crucial in separating believers and non-believers as in addressing the balance between religion as a collective enterprise ('religions') and religion as an individual practice ('spirituality'). It is, however, not groups who write histories: it is single persons. Michel de Certeau has pointed out the very individual character, the subversive power and strategic moves, and the complex relationship to their audience of the producers of historiographical writing.² These authors are as much creating, redefining, and instrumentalizing as serving groups. The command to write a history is usually self-imposed, not given by an institution. Thus, the existence of the 'traditions', the dividing line between 'secular' and 'religious', cannot be regarded as a pre-condition of the historiographical account, but might be a product of the very act of narrating and its permanent result.

This is our point of departure. The contributions to this volume are addressing the question of how instrumental historiography of religion—emic and etic—is in creating religions and the concept of a plurality of religions as accountable social units with a history of their own. What are the terminological tools (religions, confessions, schools, sects)? What are the narrative tools (stories of oaths and treaties, of deviance, of contenders ...)? What are compositional decisions to that purpose (in-group-outgroup changes of perspectives, comparison, successions as organizing principle, definition and treatment of epochs)? Are individual or institutional historiographers reacting to or shaping processes of group formation? Are they empowering or censoring individuals? The conference in which the papers to this volume were

1 Otto, Rau, Rüpke 2015.

2 de Certeau 1988; for an example see Rüpke 2015.

first presented was part of the research of the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “Religious individualization in historical perspective”³ and driven by the question of the very rise of concepts of ‘religion’ and specific ‘religions’ in debates about the collective or individual character of religion, but also of the role of urban intellectuals in such processes. The results of these probes demonstrate that the entanglement of emic and etic historiography has been seriously underrated as a factor in constructing the very terms and units of analysis of the history of religion.

The “Book of Refutation and Proof of the Despised Religion” by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, written in 12th century Spain, and its contemporary Arabic translation is analyzed by Daniel Boyarin in his article “Din as Torah: ‘Jewish Religion’ in the *Kuzari*?” It is the concept of *din* and its easy equation with ‘religion’ that forms the starting point of the inquiry. As Boyarin shows, any synonym for religion is lacking altogether. Thematizing ritual practices and their basis in revelations can be done without such a word and related specifications such as ‘Judaism’. Ethnonyms are in use, as are generalizations of Torah or sharia as laws. The article dissuades the collapse of nuances of contextually divergent uses of equations and differentiations by replacing the semantics of the text and its historical shifts with today’s standard units of different ‘religions’.

Shazad Bashir arrives at a similar pleading for attention to details. He shifts attention to Islamic historiography in “Everlasting Doubt: Uncertainty in Islamic Representations of the Past”. Ṭabarī and Badā’ūnī, Bīrūnī and Abū l-Faḏl are the classics that are investigated. The article shows their take on the past, about how one can know about the past and what questions such a past can answer. Here the uncertainty within reconstructions of the past turns out to be a strategic resource. There is no coherent ‘Islamic history’ and their histories of religion allow for very different types of religion thus recreated. It is not only religion, the article might be summarized, that is malleable. History also is a historically changing product of historiography that needs to be taken into account in looking for religion.

In “Creating Religious Identity: Rabbinic Interpretations of the Exodus” Günter Stemberger focuses on the history of the Exodus-story’s becoming a cornerstone in the Rabbinic imagination of the past from the third and fourth centuries onwards. In contrast to the historiographical works discussed by Shazad Bashir, here many different voices work on the unification of a history, the snippets of which were to be found in the biblical tradition. Midrashic interpretations, as Stemberger points out, outlined the biblical tradition to create an overarching historical context reaching back to the patriarchal period and even earlier and forward up to the actual present. Its focus and hermeneutical key is given by the Exodus story, which became inscribed into ritual texts and thus allowed for the appropriation as a foundation of a specifically Jewish identity.

³ Financed by the German Science Foundation (DFG) unter FOR 1013. I would like to thank Martin Mulsow for his share in the organization of the research program and the conference.

Recreation of the past on the basis of biblical texts did not however stop (nor begin) with Rabbinic interpretations. Reinhard Kratz, in his “Moses: Creating a Founding Figure”, traces the creation of Moses as the founding figure of Israelite and Jewish religion in his multiple roles as the leader of the people of Israel, lawgiver, and true prophet. From Antiquity onwards down into present scholarship, he claims, the discourses of a political leader and of Judaism as the religion of the law are intertwined. The topos of the lawgiver turns out to be as attractive to historiography as to past and present cultural theories and exegetics.

Ingvild Saelid Gilhus analyzes another take on biblical history in her article on “Historiography as Anti-History: Reading Nag Hammadi Codex II”. It is Genesis, not the book Exodus, which offers a point of departure for a fourth or fifth century history that propagates a negative view of procreation. In an overarching cosmic history of a good and an evil god and a number of exemplary stories, a radical counter image to traditional biblical narrative and its *exempla* is developed. In the analysis of the narrative techniques of this historiography a readership is construed that takes no interest in the usual vicissitudes of life that are the usual material of history. It is a readership that takes an elitist view of itself and anchors its view of cosmic history in rituals that are graspable in the same corpus of texts.

Nicola Denzey-Lewis focuses on a much more restricted but likewise consequential issue, that is, the recreation of an early Christianity of martyrs at the very moment when the political power of the papacy broke down in the second half of the 19th century. In her article, “The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome: How Historiography Helped Create the Crypt of the Popes”, she closely follows the steps of the archaeologist Giovanni Battista De Rossi and how his interpretation of some archaeological and epigraphic remains developed in his engagement with political developments and his encounters with pope Pius IX from 1849 onwards. Interpretations of the past are as much an instrument as a reflection of interpretations of the present and the need to anchor these in the continuity and status of a sacred history.

In her article, “‘The Immortal Traveler’: How Historiography Changed Judaism”, Cristiana Facchini investigates those historiographical traditions that contributed to the representation of Judaism as a ‘religion’ during the early modern period. Above all for the early modern period, spanning from the Renaissance to the radical Enlightenment, the contribution of these sophisticated, erudite, at times very insightful, at times wrong or limited works has largely been overlooked. Simone (Simha) Luzzatto takes pride of place amid a variety of texts and voices that tried to define Judaism in particular in its relationship to Christianity, producing historical insights as much as polemical positions. Following the reception and reworking but also the loss of these works into the 19th century and the ‘Wissenschaft vom Judentum’, the article demonstrates the multifold and winding paths leading to much of what is taken for granted at later stages.

The historiographical construction of religion and religious specifics as analyzed in this volume is not a characteristic of Western historiography and scholarship. In

“History Writing and the Making of Mongolian Buddhism”, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz reminds us forcefully of that fact. Like Cristiana Facchini, she takes her point of departure in the 17th century and its rich variety of ‘sectarian views’ and what I would call denominational historiography. It is the process of the disappearance of those many voices that is traced in her article. The development of a dominant view on the history of Mongolian Buddhism that is only one among many older narratives, with the help of modern scholarship points to a collaboration of ‘sources’ and scholars that is easily over-looked. In the end, Mongolian Buddhism is equated with Gelugpa Buddhism, and Mongolian history of religion written as the latter’s history.

Annelies Lannoy and Corinne Bonnet take a closer look at the historical and conceptual work of two scholars who were important for the development of the notion of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ as historiographical tools at the beginning of the 20th century. “Narrating the Past and the Future: The Position of the *religions orientales* and the *mystères païens* in the Evolutionary Histories of Religion of Franz Cumont and Alfred Loisy” opts for a methodological approach different from those of most of the other articles. It follows the scholars’ discourses, on the one hand in their published work, and on the other hand in their private correspondence. In such a stereoview, conceptual decisions can be located not only with regard to the ancient evidence known at the time, but also located within their view of the moral, religious and societal challenges of their contemporaneous world, disrupted by World War I. In such a close view the later reception of their view on the transition between polytheism and monotheism is also critically evaluated.

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