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Authors: Otto, Bernd / Rau, Susanne / Rüpke, Jörg

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History and Religion

History is one of the most important cultural tools to make sense of one's situation, to establish identity, define otherness, and explain change. As a consequence, the scientific discipline of history is not only practiced, but the study of historiography has advanced to a thriving field of research. In fact, an impressive amount of theoretical literature on historiography has been brought forward over the past decades. We have learned from studies focussing on the issue of narrativity that historiography is usually imbued with tendentious rhetorical patterns and 'generic story types' that significantly influence the selection and interpretation of the 'sources' it allegedly relies on.[1] The debate on postmodern history has, particularly through its core notion of 'master narrative', once again highlighted the problem of historical 'truth' and thereby also problematised the instrumentalisation of historiography for numerous other (non-historiographic) purposes.[2] Postcolonial scholars have enhanced this critique by pointing to the unavoidably contingent (that is, time- and culture-bound) position of historiographers and stressed the issues of political power, reciprocal interferences, and multi-perspectivity.[3] Out of these circumstances arose lively debates on whether historical thinking is *per se* 'Western',[4] or how one ought to produce non-eurocentric, comparative, multiperspective, or entangled historiography.[5] The vast area of historical discourse analysis[6] as well as studies on historiographic practices[7] have further complicated the matter by bringing long-neglected background factors of historiography to the fore – such as the dependence on culture-bound terminology and rules of argumentation, religious and societal influences, or monetary requirements and career perspectives.

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[1] The literature is overwhelming, thus all following references are exemplary; however, special attention is given to standard works and recent introductory handbooks, readers, or companions; see on the issue of narrativity White 1973 and 1978; Ricœur 1984 – 1988; id. 2003 and 2004; Munz 1977 and 1997; Ankersmit 2001; Conermann 2009; Hühn et al. 2009; Jobs, Lüdtke 2010; Martínez, Scheffel ^{9}2012; Georgi et al. 2015.

[2] Cf. Conrad, Kessel 1994; Jenkins 1997; Cox, Stromquist 1998; Windschuttle 2002; Roberts 2004; Stuart 2005.

[3] Cf. Freitag 1997; Codell, Macleod 1998; Duara 2002; Conrad, Randeria 2002; Cooper 2005; Chakrabarty 2008 and 2010.

[4] Cf. Rüsen 2002; Kramer, Maza 2002; partly Feldherr et al. 2011.

[5] Cf. Rüsen 1996; Wang, Iggers 2002; Fuchs, Stuchtey 2002; Budde et al. 2006; Haupt, Kocka 2009.

[6] Cf. Barthes 1997; Bieder 1998; Sarasin 2003 and 2006; Stuckrad 2013.

[7] Cf. de Certeau 2005 (1988); Rau, Studt 2010.

When combing through this vast array of theoretical literature on historiography, one makes a surprising discovery: religion is largely absent from these studies.[8] Of course, religious traditions have been used to exemplify certain theoretical arguments, or novel historiographical tools have been applied to specific religious arenas. However, religion has rarely been treated as an independent, potentially interesting, exceptional, or problematic case in the theoretical literature on historiography. To our knowledge, there is no systematic (overall and/or comparative) scholarly study devoted to determining or disentangling the complex relationship between history and religion, taking into account religious traditions both as *producers* of historical narratives as well as distinct *topics* of historiography (consider the genres of hagiography, salvation history, or conversion stories).[9] It thus seems to us that religion has not yet received appropriate attention in the theoretical literature on historiography.

This is surprising in so far as religion, in very different traditions of research, is acknowledged as a major factor for the construction of identities as it is addressed as a major factor in the course of history. Historical claims relating to religion are of utmost importance for a large number of historical as well as present (and pressing) political conflicts over territory and dominance, within Europe as much as globally. Religious groups have adopted history to strengthen their identity, justify theological or ritual matters, conceptualise extraordinary beings and events, or exclude theological oppositions and non-believers. A vast number of historical narratives has been composed by religious elites or has been produced under the patronage of religious institutions: Roman priests or magistrates writing about their own or others' cults, bishops writing for their dioceses, cardinals writing for the Roman-Catholic Church, Buddhist monks or 'lay' historians writing for monasteries or temples, Muslim biographers writing hadiths or universal chronicles (to name only a few examples addressed in this volume). As a consequence, our 'sources' for religious as well as secular history are often imbued with religious terminology, arguments and modes of thought (and these have, to a greater or lesser degree, also made their way into scholarly historiography). In fact, until today religious traditions are not merely topics, but producers and world-wide distributors of historical narratives. Religions have been and still are important protagonists in the public negotiation of historical events, agents, periods or, more generally, 'truth'.

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[8] See the following introductory handbooks on historiography: Kocka, Nipperdey 1979 – 1990; Bentley 1997; Kramer, Maza 2002; Lambert, Schofield 2004; Tellingly, within the three volumes of Burns 2006, only one article – Rudolph 2006 – is devoted to religious historiography; see also Feldherr et al. 2011.

[9] Apart from rather specific studies on sacred history (Lewis 2007, Van Liere et al. 2012) or the impact of religious pluralisation on historiography in early modern times (Rau 2002; Wallnig et al. 2012; Rau, Laudin 2014).

The impressive productivity of religions in the field of historiography is mirrored by the academic discipline of the History of Religion. Having been crucial for the establishment and early reputation of the academic Study of Religion,[10] it still forms an important part of that discipline and given the apparent 'resurgence of religion',[11] hardly a scholar will question the manifold historical dimensions of contemporary religious conflicts. Nonetheless, within the methodological scope of the Study of Religion, the importance of history seems to have receded in past decades, with sociological, political, ethnographic, or cognitive approaches coming to the fore.[12] In fact, the majority of handbooks, readers or companions published since the late 1990s in the field of Religious Studies have given only little importance to, or even entirely neglected, the notions of 'History' or 'Tradition'.[13]

This may explain why scholars devoted to the historical dimension of religion only rarely partook in the aforementioned theoretical debates in the study of historiography. In fact, the neglect of religion by theorists of historiography has an unexpected flipside: historians of religion, conversely, tended to overlook or disregard critical or deconstructionist approaches in the study of historiography and have thus missed the opportunity to strengthen their own historical methodology. When reading through recent standard works on the history of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism (to name only these), one rarely finds fundamental doubts as to the trustworthiness of the presented historical narratives or the sources these allegedly rely on. Put bluntly, notions of 'historical realism' often pervade these works, as if historians of religion are among the dwindling species of historiographers capable of showing *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ('as it actually was'; cf. Ranke 2010 [1824], VII). This is surprising not only given the unmissable critique of 'historical realism' in the theoretical literature on historiography, but also given the often tendentious, arbitrary or entirely misleading character of the majority of historiographic sources composed by the religious groups under investigation (consider, for example, Eusebius' late ancient *Historia ecclesiae* which is still one of the bases of most scholarly histories of the early Church).

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[10] Cf. Kippenberg 2002; Stausberg 2007.

[11] See e.g. Riesebrodt 2000 and 2000a; Zeidan 2003.

[12] See on this observation Uehlinger 2006; Rüpke 2011; Stuckrad 2013.

[13] See, exemplarily, Taylor 1998; Braun, McCutcheon 2000; Antes 2002; Hinnells 2005; Segal 2006; Orsi 2012; exceptions to this observation are Rüpke 2007; Stausberg, Engler 2011 (cf. Rüpke 2011).

There are some exceptions to this observation, such as the special attention given to religion in the postcolonial debate, or the notion of ‘invented tradition’ that has been widely discussed in the Study of Religion.[14] However, it seems that the two aforementioned disciplines, the Study of Historiography and the History of Religion, have hitherto operated largely independently of each other. It is this double desideratum – the neglect of religion in the theoretical literature on historiography and the neglect of a critical historiographic stance in the History of Religion – that the present volume intends to address. This is done foremost by asking questions which, from the viewpoint of the editors, have been asked much too seldom in either discipline. How, under which conditions and with what consequences are religions historicised? How do religious groups employ historical narratives in the construction of their identities? What are the biases and elisions of current analytical and descriptive frames in the History of Religion?

1 Specifics of religious historiography

If religion is a rare topic in historiographical reflection, it is certainly an interesting one. If one compares religious historiography – i.e. historical narratives created by religious groups – with modern (or pre-modern) ‘secular’ historiography, one encounters a range of unique features.

(i) One of the main characteristics of religious practices is that they attribute agency to actors that are underdetermined and not equally accepted in their properties or situational relevancy by the human actors involved in that situation (cf. Rüpke 2015). Expectably, such actors also play a major role in historical narratives composed by religious groups, even though they can take many different forms. An all-powerful god could be envisaged as being behind all historical change. Personalised (but not necessarily anthropomorphic) gods could be narrated to exert specific or even competing influence. Intermediate beings like angels could defy the classifications of gods and humans and slip in as agents in specific episodes or as intrinsic motivators of human actors. Such ‘divine’ agency may also modify the agency of human actors, enabling them to mobilise super-human powers in order to defeat enemies, foretell the future, help and heal the needy, or simply demonstrate one’s being ‘chosen’. They could command a superior contact with the gods, as prophets do, or could even be accorded with a post- or pre-divine status such as Buddhist ‘boddhisattvas’ or ancient Greek ‘heroes’. However, in religious historiography agency is not restricted to agents conceptualised on the model of a human body. Objects like stones or streams or impersonal powers like the ‘holy spirit’ or ‘karma’ might advance to carriers of historical agency. This leads to the second characteristic.

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[14] See on the latter issue Hobsbawm, Ranger 1992; Henten, Houtepen 2001; Engler 2005; Lewis, Hammer 2007.

(ii) Religious narratives on the past often include unique modes of historiographical argumentation. Impersonal fate or personal providence of the ‘gods’ are perhaps the most important modes. But even without direct divine steering, particular modes of movements in time could be invoked. History might be conceptualised as timeless, circular or as a period of decay that steers towards a final catastrophe or triumphal end. Imaginings of such large-scale processes and ever more detailed scenarios of endings have seen particular rises in situations of inner- or inter-religious conflicts, e. g. in colonial contexts that provoked literary and religious practices directed against ruling empires. Such narratives are often combined with religious concepts of history as a period of trial and individual or collective probation. The strategies of such narrative patterns vary widely. They might concentrate on a founding phase or try to integrate as much of the ‘history’ remembered by a society as they can. Mythology and history are not opposites but rather variants of historical narratives, maybe including different time indicators. Canonisation is a frequent instrument to stabilise such narratives, which could also serve as solutions to doctrinal problems or logical incoherencies.

(iii) Religious narrative and recollection of the past need not be tied to historiography, but enjoy a particularly wide range of media (cf. Conermann 2009; Rüpke 2012). Religion, in fact, provides numerous alternatives to narrative – even if narrative remains crucial and probably indispensable for the generation of a (religious) concept of time and historical consciousness (Ricœur). Hymns and prayers, for example, enable frequent repetition and memorising; liturgical recital functions in a similar manner. Rituals beyond the verbal support imaginings of the past in mimetic form or dramatic play or even competition, if we think of the ancient Mediterranean traditions of ‘games’ (cf. Bernstein 2007). Specific objects could be embedded in such rituals and thereby become imbued with historical meaning or activate such associations due to their role in mythical narrative. Images can focus on constellations and scenes, pointing to and systematising previous narratives, or even gain narrative powers. Rituals are frequently reflected in calendars that could gain independent status as popular transmitters of chronological schemes of beginnings and ends and a past that is remembered throughout the year in a sequence of festivals. At the end of the scale, buildings and monuments may reflect or shape such rituals and recitals or allude to past events by means of symbolic architecture (cf. Rüpke 2006).

(iv) Finally, religious historiography might arise not only in all those established contexts and routines of professional historiography as described by Michel de Certeau (de Certeau 2005 [1988]). Particularly situations of inner- or inter-religious conflicts – due to competing authorities or doctrinal strife – frequently gave (and give) rise to narratives that sketch different pasts (and even futures) and different genealogies. This might justify separation or legitimise authority, but it could also imply attempts to form alliances or include people otherwise conceptualised as out-groups. Histories of religions thus seem to arise in contexts of diversity and plurality. The construal of the past is a difficult thing, and it is necessary to negotiate the delicate balance between the memories of historical change narrated by others or simply in other contexts, and the continuity which is crucial for legitimating central religious tenets and institutions.

All in all, religious historiography is certainly a unique genre of historiography and the many forms of narrating the past for direct or indirect orientation of future action. Needless to say, there are numerous aspects that invite a focused analysis. However, in what follows we can only give attention to the aspect that appears most crucial to us, namely, to the relationship of religious historiography with a critical History of Religion.

2 From religious historiography to the History of Religion

The results of the efforts undertaken by religious communities to interpret and identify themselves through their past form a vast array of practices, objects, and texts that are sometimes accorded an elevated status or even entered into a body of canonical texts. Naturalising a complex situation and an even more complex past within a particular religious framework yields results that are usually not superficial propaganda. In fact, the task of religious historiography is often pursued with much ingenuity and energy, up to the standards of other contemporary historiography. Thus, religious authors produced (and produce) accounts with a correspondingly dense veneer of plausibility. Wherever practices of ritual mimesis or repetitive recitation or reading accrue, such narratives might form the very skeleton of a whole world view and produce a ‘master narrative', which, despite many variations, additions and omissions, is underlying countless accounts.

This produces a very difficult situation for historical research (cf. Rüpke 2011). Scholars of the History of Religion do not only have a large body of 'sources' due to these enterprises. Often these sources are imbued with tendentious narrative patterns that were composed to serve the purpose of identification with the communities (or authors) who produced these narratives. Such narratives that were, so to speak, produced within the objects of research – one might also use the term *emic* here (see on the emic/etic-distinction McCutcheon 1999 and therein particularly Pike 1999) – are not only one of many sources, but by their very form and rationality are often accorded a privileged status in any historical reconstruction, even if all caution of the historico-critical method is applied. Thus, historians of religion – supposed to produce *etic* accounts in the language not of the observed, but the observer, and striving to apply a methodology of understanding (*Verstehen*) of their scholarly objects – necessarily tend to follow the constructs produced by their sources and to ignore the subjective and interpretive nature of the framework that underlies these sources. One cannot question everything at the same time. Critique can only operate on particulars: the religious framework need not be, but is often exempted from it. As a result, there is often no clear dividing line between *emic* and *etic* historiography in modern scholarly narratives of a 'religious past'.

This is true, above all, for the very subject of the historical narrative. This subject is usually identified in *etic* historiography as elaborated by *emic* historiography, that is, as a specific 'religion', 'Church', 'school' or 'sect'. The alternative would be to address religious actors as the subject(s) of *etic* historiography who often, but not always grouped together. In our view, the fact that these actors are admonished by functionaries to construe their identity mostly by reference to their belonging to or 'membership' in a group or organisation should be observed and described in *etic* historiography, but not taken as its main starting point.

Nonetheless, such 'narrated identities' are often taken over by scholars as if these may legitimately be used as valid models for studying the History of Religion. For example, we continue to hear and read about the 'Church of the martyrs', about the 'victory of Buddhism', or the 'Hellenisation of Christianity' and even about 'Christianity', 'Judaism', and 'paganism' (in the late antique Mediterranean context, for example), as if these were all separate, stable and unified entities that deserve distinct treatment in *etic* historiographical accounts. In the same manner as the first of the above notions ('Church of the martyrs') is put forward already by ancient historiographers (most famously Eusebius), the notion of 'Hellenisation of Christianity' – which is clearly an extrapolation from a false dichotomy and portrayal of the appearance of Christianity on the world stage as a separate and new entity – is likewise proffered by Christian writers from Late Antiquity onwards; in fact, both notions are continuously evoked, but also critically assessed in theological literature until this day. Note that these narratives are in contradiction to the ambiguity and ambivalences which obtain in the field of religion. To be more precise, such constructions of clear-cut and unified identities obscure the analysis of the processes, functions and forms of religious practices and beliefs shared beyond the boundaries of 'religions'. In fact, many areas of the world were and are home to multiple (or rather indistinct) religious identities.

3 The concept of 'religion'

The concept of 'religion' is itself an important and problematic consequence of the methodological issue sketched so far. Recently, the critique of this concept has even led to general reserves against the historical approach implied in the discipline of History of Religion (e.g. Masuzawa 2005; Taira 2013). Thus, a brief detour is necessary.

The academic study of the History of Religion in the nineteenth century was characterised by a general trend towards (philology-based) historical research. For the representatives of 'historicism' (an important intellectual trend in the nineteenth and early twentieth century)[15] the historicisation of religion was a matter of absolute necessity in defending religion, as it allowed them to deal with the vast variety of religions and the anti-religious criticism they faced. The process of acknowledging that the present was the result of historical development was reflected in the establishment of museums and the 'restorations' of medieval castles during that time, e.g. in England, France or Germany. Thereby, scholars began to think that everything was subject to change; on the other hand, every period seemed to have its own dignity and could not simply be erased by 'progress'. Hence, everything became contingent. Yet critics of historicism looked for ways to remedy this issue of contingency: history had to be overcome by history, as Ernst Troeltsch, a towering figure of German Protestantism, postulated in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Troeltsch 1924; cf. Graf 2006). According to him, even lasting values were not ahistorical and thus bound only to systematic reflection, but were to be found in history by means of historical research.

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[15] View for different perspectives Popper 1972; Kippenberg 1992; Krech 2000; see also Wyrwa 2003.

The ‘History of Religion’ became the dominant approach to the ‘Study of Religion’ (*Religionswissenschaft, sciences religieuses*) throughout this period and was only slowly supplemented by anthropology and sociology. Historical accounts in the form of handbooks and lexica abounded.[16] The explanatory power of narratives that could assess relationships of origin, influence and chronological transition, became highly valued by scholars. Apart from theologically or philosophically minded scholars who worked towards systematic accounts of religion and paid attention to the early phenomenology of religion (cf. Rüpke 2009), most historians of religion proceeded without further methodological ado – thus raising the question whether the discipline could be regarded as historical at all (cf. Martin 1994; Crossley, Karner 2005; Segal 2006; Uehlinger 2006). Philologists subjected textual sources to critical historical analysis and used marginal or newly found texts as counter-histories of suppressed groups (like Manicheans: cf. Baur 1831). They also drew on writings in popular fiction (like the pseudepigraphical Acts of Apostles, if we think of early Christianity) in order to interpret canonical texts (e. g. Norden 1893). However, these canonical documents – precisely those texts that are most closely attached to the identities of religious communities – still remained the standard reference points for numerous overviews of the history of ‘religions’. Equally central were traditional forms of genealogy and periodisation.

The boundaries construed in religious historiography, such as the exclusion of ‘heretics’ in Christianity, the chain of ‘witnesses’ or rather ‘transmitters’ in early Islam or the genealogy and limited number of Buddhist ‘schools,’ have thereby been accepted and reproduced unchallenged by many scholars. If we look back, already Ernst Troeltsch described the process during which the term ‘Church’ was replaced with the expression ‘Christianity’ in the beginning of the twentieth century, looking at post-Reformation Churches that had been multiplying across Europe in the centuries before (cf. Troeltsch 1925). However, even though the plural form ‘Christianities’ occasionally appears in ‘Church history’, it is seldom put to use as a heuristic or descriptive device. In recent years, scholars have attempted to write global histories of Christianity by studying diffusion from a post-colonial perspective instead of merely looking at the pure history of missionary activities (e. g. Pietri, LeBoulluec, Mayeur 2000; Chidester

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[16] For instance the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by Hastings 1908 – 1921; Alfred Bertholet and Edvard Lehmann, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte: Band 1 – 2* (Tübingen 1925). Cf. Stausberg 2007.

2004; Gilley, Stanley 2006; McLeod 2009). Yet the concept of 'globalisation' is treated rather additively in these works, sequencing new chapters onto the religious history of different regions and continents. Impulses from the history of mentalities or social history have claimed to represent histories of piety or ritual (e.g. Angenendt 1997; Flanagan 2001), but they typically work within narrow boundaries that presuppose established religious and confessional categories.

On a global scale, the concept of 'religion' and the self-organisation of social groups as 'religions' have proven to be highly successful formats for establishing oneself as a national or international agent. This proliferation of the Western concept of 'religion' (often as a parasite construct riding on the back of national identity) has brought with it the construction and continuous cultivation of an interpretive account of such groups and their history, whether this is done to create boundaries by pointing to old feuds and differences or to forge alliances on the basis of a common ancestry ('Abrahamic religions': cf. Hughes 2012). For historians of religion, the potency of religious histories in international relations today brings with it the urgent challenge of renewing and revising the manner in which the historiography of religion is approached. In our view, the dangerous coupling of religious identity and historiography of religion (familiar from a tradition of 'national history') in what we might term 'confessional historiography' must be undone through the development of alternative and more complex histories of religion. Here, reflecting on the biases and concealments of (*emic*) religious historiography and on the history of its analytical and descriptive adoption in (*etic*) modern research is vital for any History of Religion in the twenty-first century.

4 Emerging alternatives

Have alternatives been developed? Only recently has the position of minorities been reconstructed on a larger historical scale.[17] One example of such work is the history of 'Western Esotericism', which has attempted to analyse a strand of religious thought and practice across the boundaries of religion, philosophy and art history, as well as beyond confessional frontiers (e.g. Zander 1999; Faivre 2000; Hanegraaff 1996 and 2012; Stuckrad 2005 and 2010; Otto 2011). This approach offers more analytical perspectives than isolated treatments of 'paganism,' even if it is termed a 'world religion' (e.g. York 2003; Harvey 1997). Some studies on the scale of countries or larger regions exist. However, approaches which investigate religion in a particular region (rather than the various religious traditions of a particular region in an additive collection) are still not widespread. For Europe, the problem of a 'history of religion in Europe' or 'history of European religion' came to be a matter of discussion around a decade ago in Germany (cf. Kippenberg, Rüpke, Stuckrad 2009). Yet, the historiography of Europe remains focused on the characteristics of (central) European Church-State relationships and above all dealing with the secularisation hypothesis. Religious interaction in the Ancient Near East has been intensively studied since the end of the nineteenth century by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, but remained focussed on developments leading to or interacting with 'ancient Israel', early Judaism and early Christianity. Here, theoretical discussions – on the conceptualisation of groups which gradually differentiated themselves from each other ('parting of the ways'), on intellectual religion with and without a basis in local groups (Gnosticism, Hermeticism), on the notion of 'religion' and on the role of public law in institutionalising religions and marginalising heretics – have been intense and could serve as a starting point for establishing new paradigms. As they stand right now, however, these studies still proceed from the separate identities promoted by the ancient historiographers, although scholars increasingly admit close and complex relationships between 'religions' (e.g. Becker, Reed 2003).

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[17] See the concept of 'minority histories' and 'subaltern histories' used by Chakrabarty 2008 (in particular 97 – 113).

Beyond narrativity and the role of historiography in religious group formation, other approaches have been developed in recent years. There are, for example, field analyses (following the works of Bourdieu) or histories of institutions that analyse institutional parameters for the making of history and the development of methodological standards (cf. Eckel, Etzemüller 2007). By shedding more light on the complex process of history making, we have learnt that writing history is not only an intellectual exercise, but that the path from the event to the written result has to pass a series of successive stages including taking notes, collecting information, scholarly networking, archiving, ordering material, talking to eye-witnesses (if possible), comparing documents, taking excerpts, writing drafts, passing censorship, finding a printer, looking for different ways of diffusion and so on (cf. Rau, Studt 2010; Jobs, Lüdtke 2011; Badea 2011; Benz 2011; Wallnig et al. 2012; Georgi et al. 2015). This *practical turn* has not yet been fully applied to the study of religious historiography, but individual studies, especially on the confessional quarrels of the early modern period, have already shown the impact and accelerating effect of religious historiography on the development of historical methodology.[18] In this sense, historiography, as well as its methodology, is always contingent as it emerges from a specific historical context. The present volume offers rich evidence for this contingency in different historical epochs and religious traditions, thus inviting historians of religion to reflect on their own methodological repertoire.

5 Structure of the volume

Even a multi-authored volume can map out only some inroads into the vast area of research sketched above. Starting from a conference hosted by the University of Norrköping and financed by the European Science Foundation in September 2012 – which unfortunately had to cut the relevant line of support shortly afterwards – and modifying, enlarging or adding further contributions, the volume aims at initiating a comparative historiography of religion and combines disciplinary competences of Religious Studies and the History of Religion, Confessional Theologies, History, History of Science, and Literary Studies. By applying literary comparison and historical contextualisation to those texts that have been used as central documents for histories of individual religious groups, their historiographic themes, tools and strategies shall be analysed. The volume thus also hopes to stimulate the history of historical research on religion by identifying key steps in the early modern and modern history of research. This is a vital task of scholarly self-reflection aimed at assessing how religion has been conceptualised, described and historicised in scholarship, on which traditions of study we as scholars are drawing, and which we are neglecting. With such an aim in mind, the combination of different traditions of research and case studies from different periods and areas promises fresh insights. The comparative approach will hence address circum-Mediterranean and European as well as Asian religious traditions from the first millennium BCE to the present.

The contributions to this volume are divided into three main sections, which will each be introduced by a brief section summary. In section one (‘Origins and developments’) the question of contexts of origins and ensuing developments will be pursued. The focus here lies on the triggers for applying historicisation to religion, on founding narratives and early stages in narrative traditions, and on the strategies and purposes of such narratives. The second section (‘Writing histories’) explores moments and processes of writing religious histories in different cultural contexts and milieus. Here, history is mostly interpreted as a process of writing and as the result of this process. Seen from this perspective, history is nothing but a social construction and it is thus the agents of historical change – be they members of religious groups or intellectuals considering themselves mere 'observers' – that lie at the epicentre of analytical reflection. Finally, both perspectives will be taken up and interpreted from the perspective of the history of research in the third section of the volume ('Transforming narratives'). Naturally, modern scholarly narratives of 'religious pasts' are considered more trustworthy and coherent than pre- or non-academic accounts. The articles assembled in this section, however, point to a more complex relationship between *emic* and *etic* historiography in the realm of religion.

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[18] See Susanne Rau’s contribution to this volume.

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