

Religion as an Object of Historical and Social Scientific Study: Global Perspectives

Workshop at the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies „Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities“
Leipzig University, 3–5 November 2021

Religion as an Object of Historical and Social Scientific Study: Global Perspectives

Convenor

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Venue

Strohsack
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In recent decades, the category of 'religion' has been increasingly problematised as a concept for comparative, trans-regional and trans-historical research. This category, a main objection goes, was coined in a particular context and retains a normative bias, either of a Christian or of a modern Western nature. Some attribute a special relevance to the modern academic study of religion in shaping or even creating the category of 'religion'. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, 'religion' has become a meaningful category globally. This historical process of globalisation cannot be attributed solely to the influence of Western hegemony. Neither does it amount to homogenisation. While historical and social scientific approaches to religion do seem to be most firmly and widely established in European and North American academic settings, their establishment and differentiation from theology is more recent than is often assumed. Equally, the historical and social scientific study of religion is not confined to Europe and North America, but has also become institutionalised in other regions and contexts.

This workshop will bring together case studies and theoretical reflections on the study of religion as an object of historical and social scientific inquiry in different academic contexts in the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. We are especially interested in the global presence and characteristics of religion as an object of study in the most pertinent academic disciplines: History of Religion; Comparative Religious Studies; Sociology; Anthropology

and Political Science (excluding Theology and Philosophy). Central questions concern the place, status and history of research on religion in these disciplines: What are the main authors, theories and topics? Do academics within these disciplines understand their approach to be secular, and how do they distinguish it from theological approaches? How do they conceptualise 'religion' and do they address the question of universality and particularity, or the issue of (de-)colonisation in this regard? In the respective disciplines, which canons and genealogies of the study of religion are constructed? What connections, but also barriers are there between research on religion in different academic contexts? What are the institutional, political and societal conditions facilitating or hindering the establishment and development of the mentioned disciplinary approaches to religion?

We will be discussing these and related questions over the course of three days, bringing together expertise from various disciplines and on different regions: whether in presence or virtually, we are excited to welcome contributors from Austria, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Lebanon, and the United States; and we much look forward to both the individual case studies on our common topic as well as to the conversations across the disciplines of Anthropology, History, Islamic studies, Study of Religions, Sinology, and Sociology.



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Wednesday, 3 November 2021

Strohsack | room 4.55

- 11.30 a.m. – 1.00 p.m. **Registration and lunch**
- 1.00 p.m. – 1.30 p.m. **Opening remarks by Christoph Kleine (Director HCAS „Multiple Secularities“) and Florian Zemmin (Convenor)**
- 1.30 p.m. – 3.30 p.m. **PANEL I (see pp. 5–7)** Discussant: Christoph Kleine
- Peter Beyer** Religion in the 21st Century: Disciplinary Critique, Global Restructuring, Categorical Diversity
- Steven Sutcliffe** A (Meta) Case Study in Disciplinary Formation: ‘Religious Studies’ in the UK
- Jens Kreinath** ‘Object’ Formations in the Anthropology of Islam: Why to Study Muslims Ethnographically?
- 3.30 p.m. – 4.00 p.m. **Coffee break**
- 4.00 p.m. – 6.00 p.m. **PANEL II (see pp. 8–10)** Discussant: Markus Dreßler
- Yunus Doğan Telliel** ‘Religious Language’ as a Comparative Category
- Indrek Peedu** Hierarchies of Disciplinary Approaches and Research Practices in the Study of Religion
- Sari Hanafi** The Protracted Misunderstanding between the Secular versus the Religious: A Convivialist Perspective
- 7.00 p.m. **Joint dinner for all invited participants**

Thursday, 4 November 2021

Strohsack | room 4.55

- 12.00 a.m. – 1.00 p.m. **Lunch on premises**
- 1.00 p.m. – 3.00 p.m. **PANEL III (see pp. 11–13)** Discussant: Sushmita Nath
- Giovanni Maltese** Is Islam a Religion? Conceptualizing Islam in Southeast Asia (1930s–1940s)
- Anindita Chakrabarti Mujeebu Rahman** Religion as an Object of Social Scientific Study: The Case of Islam in India
- Julian Strube** Bengali Contributions to a Global History of “Sciences of Religion”
- 3.00 p.m. – 3.30 p.m. **Coffee break**
- 3.30 p.m. – 6.00 p.m. **PANEL IV (see pp. 14–17)** Discussant: Adrian Hermann
- Christian Meyer** Negotiating Religion as *zongjiao* in the Academic Field in Late Imperial and Republican China (1890s–1949)
- Elisabeth Marx** Talking about Religion by Talking About Its Other: Conceptions of the Secular in Japanese Academic Networks of the 1970s and 1980s
- Roohola Ramezani** Recent Approaches to the Sociology of Religion in Iran: Introduction and Pathology
- Olga Odgers-Ortiz** Religion as a (Changing) Object of Social Scientific Study in Latin America
- 7.00 p.m. **Joint dinner for all invited participants**

Friday, 5 November 2021

Strohsack | room 4.55

10.00 a.m. – 12.00 p.m.	PANEL V (see pp. 18–20)	Discussant: Monika Wohlrab-Sahr
	Roberto Franceso Scalon	The Sociological Study of Religion and Religiosity in Italy as a Utopian-ideological Self-fulfilling Prophecy of the “Italian Happy Secularization”
	Marco Papisidero	The Canonization Processes of the Catholic Church: A Meta-study Approach
	Liudmila Nikanorova	What does Shamanism do for the Academic Study of Religion?
12.00 p.m. – 1.30 p.m.	Lunch on premises	
1.30 p.m. – 3.30 p.m.	PANEL VI (see pp. 21–23)	Discussant: Florian Zemmin
	Armando Salvatore Kieko Obuse	ReOrienting Religion: For a Hermeneutic Sociology of East-West Engagement
	Rushain Abbasi	Doing Away with Religion: From Protestant Heresy to Post-Colonial Orthodoxy
	Andrea Pintimalli	Other History of Religion? An Islamic Case Study
3.30 p.m. – 4.00 p.m.	Coffee break	
4.00 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.	Concluding discussion and plans for publication	
7.00 p.m.	Joint dinner for all invited participants	

Religion in the 21st Century: Disciplinary Critique, Global Restructuring, Categorical Diversity

Peter Beyer

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Religion as a category and object of study in (Western) academia has undergone a sequence of upheavals over the last several decades, in part in response to significant transformations in the global social world, in part as a reflection of internal disciplinary developments. This paper focuses on such transformations and developments principally within the disciplines of religious studies and the sociology of religion. In both, recent decades have seen serious challenges to formerly dominant approaches to both category and object of study. These include the attempted undermining of secularization theory and its replacement with, among others, religious economy theory (e.g. Stark, Bibby, Berger); the critical religion approach (e.g. McCutcheon, Nongbri, Masuzawa, Asad) with its critique of ‘religion’ as a Western, Christian, colonialist, and theological category; the lived religion debate (e.g. Orsi, Ammerman, McGuire) with its insistence that institutional religion is too narrowly conceived; the nonreligion debate (e.g. Lee, Quack, Burchardt) which seeks to break the religion/nonreligion binary; the spiritual revolution debate (e.g. Heelas, Woodhead) which seeks to relocate religion in non-institutionalized forms; and the cultural religion debate (e.g. Beaman, Jopke) which sees a similar displacement of the centre of gravity for the category away from institutional religion. In all these, however, institutional religion is still the explicit or implicit foil, or standard, by which these new directions are presented and defined. The proposed paper summarizes these transformations and debates, and then presents three interrelated arguments: a) Both transformations, in the disciplines and in the larger social and global context, are the latest versions of a very long discussion and development that have their roots in the 19th and 20th century foundation of religion as an analytic category, in the imperial/colonial spread and glocal appropriation of the category, and in the ‘Westphalian’ institutional modeling of religion with the modern nation-state. b) The current transformations in the ‘religious field’ are a reflection of a decline in that modeling, yielding uncertainty as to how, if at all, religion should be conceived. c) The idea of religion (and secularization as the decline of said religion) should not be discarded because it is misconceived or too narrow/wound up in power relations, but should be contextualized in a broader diversity of categorization that goes beyond the binary modeling of religion/nonreligion (or secular). A systems-theoretical approach informs all three arguments.

A (Meta) Case Study in Disciplinary Formation: 'Religious Studies' in the UK

Steven Sutcliffe

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The debate on 'religious studies' as a disciplinary formation in the humanities and social sciences remains a constant feature of the late modern field. In this paper I explore the problem of the epistemological-sociological emergence of 'Religious Studies' in the UK from the late 1960s as a case study in the formation of an inter/disciplinary scientific paradigm.

RS in the UK developed as an (Anglophone) variation of a wider transnational modernist project of 'Comparative Religion'. Local institutional pragmatics, plus continuing 'fudged' religion/state political relationships, encouraged the assimilation in the UK of the hybrid administrative rubric 'Theology and Religious Studies' (TRS), from the early 1990s, which soon came to determine the UK research audit (now the Research Excellence Framework/REF).

On the one hand, the comparative study of religion/s had been independently pursued in the UK since 1954, under the auspices of a local/national academic society with its own regional ancestry, linked to the International Association for the History of Religions (est. 1950). On the other hand, since 1992, 'Religious Studies' in the UK has been incorporated into a wider administrative rubric which contains an unresolved tension

between 'study of' (in which religion/s is unambiguously the object) and 'religious' studies (in which the method remains ambiguous).

This paper explores the contemporary and recent contention and prognosis of these disciplinary (meta) issues in the UK context.

'Object' Formations in the Anthropology of Islam: Why to Study Muslims Ethnographically?

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The field of an Anthropology of Islam (envisioned by Geertz, el-Zein, and Asad) provides an interesting venue to discuss the theme of this conference. Not only is Islam currently practiced and studied on a global scale but it is also challenged as a unified object of study by leading scholars of religion and Islam. A meta-disciplinary approach to an Anthropology of Islam provides a relevant case for analyzing institutional research practices and relationships between theology, anthropology, and the science of religion, by focusing on what methods are used and what concepts are formed to configure the respective field of study.

Aside from the problem among early historians of religion of whether and how to present Islam in the genealogy of religions; neither Islam nor its varied interpretations were challenged in their status as an 'object' of historical and social scientific study. However, first-hand colonial encounters with traditions and interpretations of Islam not only led to the institutionalization of Oriental scholarships in the 'Mother Countries' by 'Othering' colonized people and their religions and cultures, but also laid

the foundation for challenging the very conceptualization of Islam through ethnographic research.

The aim of this paper is to trace the institutional genealogy of the Anthropology of Islam – and particularly its category formation and research objective – through distinctions like those between 'great' and 'little' traditions and dichotomies like those between 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' Islam. Based on first-hand accounts of saint veneration rituals at shared sacred sites across the Mediterranean and their often conflicting conceptualization, this paper develops a relational approach as configured through the concept of 'interrituality' and traces processes of 'object' formations through the lens of different conceptualizing practices within varied disciplinary frameworks.

'Religious Language' as a Comparative Category?

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Postcolonial scholarship has shown that the comparative study of religion emerged out of colonial structures of power, and was founded on Western and Christian preconceptions. What is the predicament of anthropological analysis beyond this problematic legacy? Webb Keane and other anthropologists located in North America, whose writings contributed significantly to the construction of religious language as a distinct anthropological topic, have taken up this challenge. While they are deeply aware of religion's problematic legacy, they claim that 'religious language' presents an opportunity for reviving anthropological theorizing as a comparative enterprise. Focusing on Keane and other anthropologists of religious language, I first discuss how linguistic practices in religious and spiritual contexts have come to be seen as building blocks of a new comparativism at a time when, as the conference organizers put it, "the concept of religion has been increasingly problematised as a concept for comparative, trans-regional and trans-historical research." In the second part, I move to a discussion of a Turkish divinity school context where some Muslim scholars have been thinking about 'religious language' (*din dili*) as a universal theological category. Despite their shared interest in religious language and its prevalence

across human communities, North American anthropologists and Turkish theologians tend to operate with different ontological presumptions regarding linguistic mediation. I argue that Turkish theologians' comparative framework is—in some ways—as comprehensive as North American anthropologists'. Reflecting on this point, I ask: is it possible to reimagine comparativism beyond the duality of universalism and particularism, or essentialism and nominalism?

Hierarchies of Disciplinary Approaches and Research Practices in the Study of Religion

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This paper will focus on ways how acquiring reliable knowledge about religion as a phenomenon is understood in the different research approaches within contemporary study of religion. I will approach this issue by analysing how knowledge-production and the interrelationship of different disciplinary practices is understood in two distinctly different approaches in the contemporary study of religion – the historical and comparative study of religion on the one side and the evolutionary-cognitive study of religion on the other. Both of these research approaches rely on their own distinct understandings of the supposed proper hierarchy of academic disciplines, ideals of scientificity and criteria for assessing the methodological self-positioning of the scholar – and these understandings are in many respects very much in conflict with each other. For example, they rely on very different understandings of what counts as empirical research and what kind of knowledge should be considered primary and thus centrally important for all subsequent research activities. However, in often overlooked ways they also rely on each other.

The interrelatedness of these two research approaches forms a particularly interesting case study because researches on both sides continue to conceptualize their main research

'object' (religion and everything that comes with it, so to say) in noticeably similar ways, thus very much understanding both sides as studying the same phenomenon. Thereby a shared (even if occasionally disputed) 'conceptual territory' is created that enables communication, continuous attention on each other's research as well as the occasional rather significant reliance on the research of the other side (whether admitting this or not!). In my paper, I will analyse these aspects in detail to exemplify how historical and comparative study of religion on the one side and the evolutionary and the cognitive study of religion on the other (and their interrelationship) is understood in the contemporary study of religion and what a closer look at this situation can mean for the study of religion as a whole.

The Protracted Misunderstanding between the Secular versus the Religious: A Convivialist Perspective

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Religion is often understood as a separate social sphere. I belong to anti-utilitarian and convivialist sociology that refuses to see society as differentiated into separate compartments, one of them being religion. The spheres of religion, culture, politics, social and economy are traversed by common logics that allow a given society to be encompassed in its totality, exactly as Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi did. Due to this differentiation approach, there is so much misunderstanding between the secular versus the religious and the religious and the other spheres. In this paper, I will proceed with two highlights: first, I will deconstruct rigid secularism, as one of the sources of this misunderstanding; then, I will provide an example from the Arab world scrutinizing the relationship between the religious and the political.

Is Islam a Religion? Conceptualizing Islam in Southeast Asia (1930s – 1940s)

Giovanni Maltese

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The usefulness of 'religion' as analytical category has been questioned not only by scholars of religious studies but also by Islamicists. Building on the assumption that the category of 'religion' universalizes concepts particular to contexts dominated by Christians (e.g. the religious/secular divide) and, hence, reifies the idea of a 'Western' superiority, these Islamicists have called to dismiss 'religion' as a conceptual tool in favor of the 'Qur'anic term' *din*. A similar argument can also be found 'on the ground.' *Da'wa* groups in Malaysia, for example, maintain that the category of religion serves a 'Western, neo-colonialist agenda' and reject to be called 'religious.' Analyzing debates about 'Islam' and 'religion' conducted in the 1930s/1940s in Southeast and South Asia, I argue that it is misleading to view Muslims referring to Islam as religion (both within and outside academia) as mere reproducers of so-called Western categories.

I contend that a study of how Muslims conceptualized Islam vis-à-vis 'religion' and 'West' in this context offers fresh perspectives in tackling questions of Eurocentrism in and decolonization of academic research. Thus, I propose that an approach that views the current use of and debates about Islam

and religion as products of globally entangled history is more conducive for a scholarship that aims at critically questioning its generic terms along with global asymmetries and the epistemic violence they entail.

Religion as an Object of Social Scientific Study: The Case of Islam in India**Anindita Chakrabarti**

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It is hard to locate religious studies as a separate academic discipline in the Indian context. In contrast to the divinity schools and theology departments in the west, there is a complete disconnect between academic disciplines and religion as an object of enquiry in the subcontinent. Indologists' textual engagements and administrator's accounts during the colonial period led to the construction of a particular understanding of pan-Indian civilization, which advanced the study of Hinduism. Because of this established paradigm, other religions are often explored through the categories employed to study Hinduism. It appeared that the significant aspect of non-Hindu religions was their syncretic (or liminal) element. For instance, in the case of Islam, much of the works on syncretism investigated practices associated with customs and beliefs in Islam and their accounted entanglement with Hindu customs. In post-independent India, the question of religion surfaced in relation to the partition of British India along the line of religious identity and its offshoots: communalism and fundamentalism.

The questions of religious minorities and the governance of religion also came into focus. It is impossible to study Islam and the Muslim communities without considering the political developments of the post-colonial reformist state. Customs, which are part of Islam, such as veiling, and issues of Muslim personal law (especially polygamy and extra-judicial divorce), have profoundly contributed to the stereotype that Islam is antithetical to modern India. The paper proposes to bring together the sociological and anthropological debates focusing on Islam in India to understand how they conceptualize Islam and deal with the question of Islamisation and syncretism or the question of universalism versus particularism. It explores the social scientific discourse on Islam as a minority religion negotiating reform, revival, and everyday piety in the context of secular democracy where a modern state is seen as the institution through which religion is administered, and secularism is upheld.

Bengali Contributions to a Global History of 'Sciences of Religion'**Julian Strube**

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Friedrich Max Müller considered the origins of 'comparative religion,' not in Europe but in India, regarding the Bengali Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) as its 'founder.' Rammohan, who is also credited with introducing the notion of 'Hindooism,' is well known, not only as the 'father of modern India' but also as an outstanding actor within global debates about the origin, meaning, and future of 'religion' or, as many contemporaries would have had it, *dharma*. His interactions with North American and European Unitarians in the early 1800s will allow for exploration of two aspects: first, the Bengali development of a 'science of religion' in close entanglement with the emergence of its 'Western' counterpart; and second, the establishment and shifting of disciplinary boundaries against a shared historical background.

I will focus on the vernacular Bengali context in which Rammohan's comparative religion was shaped and further developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, following a trajectory from Rammohan's activities to a 'rivalry' about the meaning of 'science of religion' between Müller, Unitarians, and members of the hugely influential Bengali reform society, the Brahmo Samaj. In light of examples such

as the famed Brahma Rajnarayan Basu, I will demonstrate how the notions of 'science' and 'religion' were locally contested, which demands consideration of diachronic developments in Bengal (such as *dharmaśāstra*, *vedānta*, *navya-nyāya*, or the *tantras*). I will offer theoretical reflections on how these local developments relate to global debates, considering the ambiguities and contradictions of the colonial context.

This will allow for a discussion of how disciplinary boundaries were constantly re-negotiated through global exchanges. Unitarians, Transcendentalists, Brahmos, and orientalist such as Müller shared central assumptions, such as the pure origin and core of 'true' religion (often considered 'Aryan'), the 're-discovery' of which went hand in hand with reformism and outright opposition to established forms of religion. Upon scrutiny, demarcations between rivaling 'sciences of religion,' theology, or movements such as Brahmoism appear anything but clear. Against their shared historical background, I will argue that our own discipline, religious studies, has a global history that awaits further research beyond its 'Western' institutional structures.

Negotiating Religion as *zongjiao* in the Academic Field in Late Imperial and Republican China (1890s–1949)

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Research on religion developed in China as early as in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century. It was closely connected to the introduction of a new term '*zongjiao*' that was coined to translate the Western-shaped term of religion. However, even after its introduction it was object of permanent – academic and non-academic – negotiations and successively adopted different layers of meaning. The paper aims at analyzing the shifting discursive contexts, strategies and motivations of relevant agents and accordingly how meanings of 'religion' or the 'religious' were permanently renegotiated. Altogether it shall reveal how and under which conditions religion as an object was treated in Chinese academic research of this time.

In a first step, based on an analysis of publications, course curricula and scholarly networks the presentation will demonstrate that while the field of academic study of religion (or 'religious studies', in Chinese *zongjiaoxue*) first arose in Christian missionary colleges in the 1890s, it developed at the latest in the 1920s into a general field of interest. However, at the same time political and ideological conditions, in particular the anti-religious movement of the 1920s, limited

its development as a widely institutionalized discipline. In a second step we will show how the new introductory works tried to introduce religion as universal category, and thereby aimed to build discursive coalitions between adherents of so-called higher religions against the background of anti-religious movements. Hereby translating and local interpretation (as 'translingual practice') were going hand in hand. The paper shall therefore explore and evaluate how much the Chinese concept of '*zongjiao*' with its global influences and indigenous roots implied meanings that were both relatable to a global genealogy of 'religion', but also compatible to local semantics.

Talking about Religion by Talking About Its Other: Conceptions of the Secular in Japanese Academic Networks of the 1970s and 1980s

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Conceptual discussions about secularization, secularism, laïcité, and secularity increased gradually over the past 60 years in Japanese academic discourse. Still, they remain rather marginal compared to the widespread debates about the constitutional separation of state and religion or historical analyses of pre-war non-religious Shinto. Although all these concepts address the borders of religion, religion's relationship with the political seems to be of greater interest than its relation to other spheres of society.

Despite a few works trying to address the historical academic discourse about conceptions of the secular within the Sociology of Religion in Japan, a general overview of conceptual distinctions of the secular and the disciplinary sites where these are discussed is still missing. In this regard, this paper will follow the line of asking for the borders of religion by analysing studies during the 1970's and 1980's, and make an attempt to understand religion from the perspective and

conceptualization of its other in a wider circle of academic networks in Japan and beyond.

The focus will be on contributions preserved in the National Diet Library to identify the varieties of conceptions of the secular. This includes an analysis of respective bibliographies concerning native and/or foreign ideas and narratives scholars draw upon to legitimize their understanding of the secular and to constitute disciplinary canons by attributing relevance to certain scholarly contributions.

Recent Approaches to the Sociology of Religion in Iran: Introduction and Pathology

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The field of sociology of religion has been wildly accused in Iran for being secular and Christian. Specially within the context of excessive debates concerning the Islamization and indigenization of science, such accusations seem to have largely precluded the development of the field within Iranian academia. Yet some Iran-based sociologists have recently tried to go against the flow, initiating different approaches to a sociology of Islam, Shia Islam in particular. Certain *local* religious events—such as Arba'een, Ashura, and Haj—as well as certain phenomena with significant religious implications—such as

the emergence of new forms of relationship and new forms of spirituality—have thus been subjects of different studies. At the same time, however, attempts toward theoretically grounding such approaches have been entangled in demanding methodological problems. In this paper I introduce these recent approaches, offer a pathology of them by considering the methodological problems with which they are faced, and examine the prospect for an *Iranian* sociology of religion.

Religion as a (Changing) Object of Social Scientific Study in Latin America

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The study of religions in Latin America has been more closely linked to sociology and anthropology than to philosophy or theology. And although prominent authors from Europe and the United States have always had a clear influence, Latin American scholars have also developed their own currents of thought (Blancarte 2020, Odgers 2020). These Latin American currents are based on the analysis of empirical realities that frequently differ from those observed in other contexts. Thus, for example, while the theory of secularization aroused limited interest, the study of religious syncretism (Marzal) or expressions of popular religiosity (Parker, Suárez, Martin) have been relevant analytical axes.

In the last decade, Latin American sociologists and anthropologists have begun to displace the category 'religion' with more open or fluid terms, such as 'spirituality' or 'practices of sacralization'.

What is the reason for this shift? Is it a reappropriation of global academic debates? Is it related to an ongoing Latin American societal change? Is it a reflection of the passage of an emic term to the academic sphere? Or is it a passing fad among social scientists? In this paper, we propose to address these questions, focusing on the case of Latin American social sciences.

The Sociological Study of Religion and Religiosity in Italy as a Utopian-ideological Self-fulfilling Prophecy of the 'Italian Happy Secularization'

Roberto Francesco Scalon

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The paper focuses on the sociology of religion in Italy conducted at the academic level from the late 1960s to today, concerning the religious orientations of the Italian population.

The working hypothesis is placed on the level of the sociology of knowledge and states that the configuration of the sociology of religion in Italy has developed mainly on a rationalist hermeneutic platform. It would then be articulated by proceeding mainly along two parallel tracks, the secularist and Marxist one and the Marxist and progressive Catholic one, which found their meeting point in terms of a substantial mutual legitimation.

At this regard may be important to consider, at first, the selection of the theoretical-interpretative frameworks of reference utilized for the sociological analysis; secondly, the personal involvement, more or less militant, of Italian sociologists of religion, within both the Italian Catholicism and the Italian political system and civil society, prevalently on progressive positions.

More precisely: the sociology of religion in Italy – especially the sociological analysis of the relationship between Italian Catholicism and the process of modernization – has

been configured as a self-fulfilling prophecy: that of the inexorable secularization of Catholic Italy by virtue of both the modernization of Italian society in positivist terms and, hand in hand, the huge affirmation of the modernist and neo-modernist demands in the Italian church.

The latent narrative of the prophecy envisages the 'utopian-ideological' dialogue between secular rationalism and religious sense, between Marxist atheism and Catholic faith, as a calculated risk for the mutual recognition and the consequent synthesis of opposites: whose form should be the 'happy secularization' of Italian society as an obligatory path for a just society, at the same time more modern-secular but no less Catholic. The epilogue seems to be a deep secularization and the end of Italian Catholicism as confessional religion.

The Canonization Processes of the Catholic Church: A Meta-study Approach

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One of the main aspects of history of religions is the analysis of items that have been composed for religious and theological purposes, such as texts, prayers, etc. The historical method is applied with the aim of approaching these sources from a scientific point of view, often through the adoption of a wide range of disciplines. Sometimes this methodology is also utilized by religious authorities with specific purposes.

The aim of this proposal is to analyse the canonization process (i.e. the registration of a person in the lists of the blessed or of the saints) conducted by the Catholic Church, focusing on the *Positio* (position). This is a text composed by the Postulator, or proponent of a cause for the canonization of a dead person, designed to present his or her virtues, life, miracles and fame of sanctity, so that a commission of theologians can verify whether or not he or she deserves to be canonized. It is a multidisciplinary procedure combining history, theology and canonical law.

The *Positio* is a very useful object of study for an historian of religions, because it is characterized, at least partially, by a scientific approach (in the selection of sources, in their analysis, in the historical reconstruction), although its aim is theological, i.e. the demonstration of the 'sanctity' of a person. The study of

a *Positio* can be conducted considering two meta-study aspects: the procedure through which the Postulator writes and composes the text, using historical method but with a theological purpose; the historian's analysis of the text itself, in order to verify not only the way in which the historical method has been applied, but also how the Postulator has considered, for example, specific aspects while leaving others in the background. This case study, through a meta-study approach, allows me to reflect on the way in which historians – but also Postulators themselves – regard and use their discipline in a scientific manner, and how they distinguish it from a theological approach.

What does Shamanism do for the Academic Study of Religion?

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In this paper, I problematize shamanism as an analytical category and challenge it through critical reading of scholarships about the area that has continuously attracted scholars and travelers in search for Siberian shamanism – Sakha Sire [Sa. 'the Sakha Land', currently known as the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic]. Inspired by the theoretical and methodological work of scholars, who challenge the universality of established Western colonial knowledges (L.T. Smith, W. Mignolo, E. Said, I. Wallerstein, B. Tafjord, M. Dressler and A.P. Mandair), I reflect on the use of shamanism in the academic study of religion. The term shaman entered European and then global imaginations and vocabularies through the writings of the eighteenth-century travelers and missionaries and was reserved to Siberian practitioners to mark their assumed ethnic and civilizational differences. With the added -ism, shamanism became one of the comparative imagined commonalities of people grouped by Eurocentric thinkers into 'tribal', 'primitive', 'aboriginal', 'indigenous' in English and *Naturvölker* ('in contrast' to European *Kulturvölker*) in German. Not only Sakha oyuun were translated into shaman and described as 'hysterical, crazy and wacky devil-worshippers' (e.g. Sieroszewski 1896, Khudyakov 1896), these translations towards religion and shamanism

subjected oyuun to imprisonment and eradication as a result of anti-religious Soviet policies (Znamensky 2001, Vasil'eva 2000). A number of scholars urged fellow colleagues to abandon the terms 'shamans' and 'shamanism' as analytical categories (Shirokogoroff 1935, Rydving 2011). However, not only these categories are still used analytically, they dominate the field to this day partly due to the legacy of expedition ethnographies and shamanologists Mircea Eliade (1972) and Michal Harner (1980). I discuss in this paper *Horizons of Shamanism* (2016) from Stockholm University Press as one of the numerous contemporary examples of non-critical translation of Sakha practitioners into shaman. I argue that such translations homogenize and shamanize Sakha practitioners and practices, which could be described in a variety of ways that might or might not be identified as religious or secular. Moreover, I stress that the study of shamanism tells us more about the colonial legacies, the need for juxtaposition against the emerged paradigm of world religions, and the role of scholarly categories than about the practices and people who inhabit the imagined region of Siberia.

ReOrienting Religion: For a Hermeneutic Sociology of East-West Engagement

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The critics of the Western hegemonic notion of 'religion,' such as Talal Asad and his school, have often invoked the precedent of *The Meaning and End of Religion* by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. This paper explores how two scholars who closely collaborated with Smith, namely Toshihiko Izutsu and Robert Bellah, reworked some of his intuitions and created alternate venues of reflection on the origin, articulation, and evolution of 'religion.' Based on the analysis of the main works of Izutsu and Bellah and archival sources documenting their dialogue with Smith, the paper suggests how their engagement with both Islam (like Smith and Asad) and Japanese religions (unlike them) contributed to break the intellectual stalemate of the critique of 'religion.'

In particular, the paper will show how Izutsu undertook this program by placing Islam at the center of the Afro-Eurasian map of circulation of religious ideas. We argue that rather than basing his methodology on an external scrutiny of ideas of religion via genealogy and discourse analysis, Izutsu focused on how religious traditions provide resources for the unpacking of their own overarching categories.

In addition, we explore how Izutsu's methodology helps transcending the stale notions of religion still entertained by Axial Age theory also by illuminating Bellah's dictum that within religious processes "nothing is ever lost." This was also done by Izutsu by turning to the teeming world of 'inter-religion,' i.e., of circulation, sharing, and mutual appropriations of religious ideas and practices, manifested through the power of vision, sound, and the 'magic' of language expressivity. In conclusion, we show how through a highly original methodology drawing on the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind in combination with more traditional approaches to the study of texts, Izutsu developed a hermeneutic sociology relying on a radiant transcultural vision breaking through conventional East-West boundaries. In this way, he profoundly altered the most resilient among Western misconceptions of both religion in general and Islam in particular.

Doing Away with Religion: From Protestant Heresy to Post-Colonial Orthodoxy

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In recent years, the validity of the category of religion has been increasingly subjected to severe criticism across several academic disciplines. The thrust of this critical position rests, in the main, on one central claim, which is that the notion of religion did not exist in non-Western and premodern civilizations and is, therefore, a unique invention of the modern West. This paper seeks to unsettle this assumption by demonstrating that the critique of the category of religion is itself a thoroughly Western affair, one which has wrongly precluded the possibility of both the historical and analytical relevance of 'religion' to non-Western traditions and civilizations. I set out to achieve this goal by focusing in particular on the figure of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the historian of religion who first popularized the critique of 'religion' in his *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Despite the historical nature of his work, I argue that Smith's theoretical premises are deeply indebted to a distinctively Protestant genealogy which itself laid the basis for the critique of 'religion.' After briefly elaborating this theological tradition, I proceed to reveal the post-colonial transmutation of Smith's work through the writings of Talal Asad and his successors, which like its theological precursors, similarly rely on certain ideological assumptions common to a particular tradition in the

Western academy (in this case, the school of critical theory) rather than a clear demonstration that 'religion' never existed before Europe. By subjecting the critique of the category of religion to its own form of genealogical inquiry, I hope to generate the possibility for the historical, analytical, and even theological relevance of the idea of religion to non-Western traditions and civilizations.

Other History of Religion? An Islamic Case Study

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The context that has emerged in recent decades, following the end of colonialism and the consequent increased presence of local cultures on the international academy, represents a new phase in the field of religious studies. Today, the demand by those cultures for a place of equal dignity in the scientific dialogue, together with an increasingly profound questioning in Europe and North America, and with the rise of the so-called post-secularism and the 're-enchantment of the world', have produced the emergence of new trends in the field of religion studies and the consequent push to rethink the foundations of the discipline, including the very concept of 'religion' with respect to which the debate has never been entirely dormant. Richard King launched an appeal for the future of the discipline in order to overcome the idea of 'Western exceptionalism', attempting to trace the precedents of religious studies in other cultures. In this talk I will present an Islamic case study of other religious traditions, that of al-Bīrūnī (973–1048?). Al-Bīrūnī, a polymath exponent of the Golden Age of Islamic culture, contemporary and intellectual rival of Avicenna, with a methodology recognised as scientifically modern by several scholars, composed two major works on religious traditions.

A work dedicated to calendar systems in which he deals with eleven religious traditions, and one dedicated to the Indian Subcontinent in which he compared the philosophical and religious thought of Ancient Greek, Jewish, Christian and Sufi sources with Sanskrit tradition. According to the lexical analysis I have conducted, in these works al-Bīrūnī uses thirteen different Arabic expressions, all rendered as 'religion' in the English translations of the two books. Al-Bīrūnī's conceptions expressed in his works about human condition, the search for knowledge, and different religious traditions hardly fit in the Western categories of religion and its opposition to secularity. Indeed, the vastness of al-Bīrūnī's knowledge, his scientific rigour and achievements urge us to rethink 'religion' as an analytical category, with the aim of finding a possible universally human concept.

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