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"Bringing it All Back Home"

Mentalities, Models and the Historical Study of Religions

1. In the beginning

A ninth century anecdote from the Book of Leinster relates how the poets of mediaeval Ireland were gathered together in order to find out if they could recall the epic poem *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in its entirety (see Táin 1990: 1, 255). The *Táin* is the national epic of the Irish which relates the story of the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn single-handedly fighting off an enemy army. But none of the poets knew the whole story, so the deeds of the past generations had to be reconstructed through fragments of information gathered from different poets. In early Irish society the learned class of poets (*filid*) also played the role of the historians of their community, and their task was to pass on the traditions of the community to coming generations (see, e.g. McCone 1990: 19–22).

Differing from their mediaeval predecessors, modern historians know that the *Táin* is not history. However, for a long time the basic working methods of modern historians were in fact closely following the methods described in the anecdote above. The basic methodological strategy in this so-called *historicistic* approach is to reconstruct the past "as it essentially was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*).[1] According to the scholars working with this approach, this is achieved simply by collecting and combining together the fragmentary evidence of different literary sources and revealing the past in this manner. Thus, the historicist tradition sees its task in purely descriptive terms. In such a framework, the methodological discussions concern mainly how accurate, or how complete, a reconstruction is —

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[1] This statement that has become the motto of the historicistic approach was made by the German scholar Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), who was one of the main promoters of modern historical scholarship. See, e.g. Heikkinen 1996: 18–19.

or, in other words, how well does a reconstruction correspond with the actual past events.[2]

According to the aforementioned anecdote, despite the efforts of the *filid*, they were unable to reconstruct a satisfying picture of the past events from the available material, and in the end they had to summon from the dead Fergus Mac Roich, one of the leading heroes connected with the *Táin*, to recite the whole story for them (Táin 1990: 1–2). Modern historians cannot rely on ghosts as their sources, but we can comfort ourselves by noting that it did not do much good for the *filid*, neither, as three different recensions of the *Táin* have come down to us, all of them differing from the others not only in details, but also in the descriptions of some basic events in the tale.[3] Historians of today are increasingly aware of the problems connected with the historicistic paradigm. The past is not something that can be reached independently from the interpretative decisions of modern scholars. Jonathan Z. Smith has argued that nothing is studied "just because it is "there", but because it connects in some interesting way with something else" (Smith 1983: 216). Thus, the picture of the past is always a scholarly construction based on the background assumptions and research objectives of individual historians (see, e.g. Jenkins 1991: 5–26).

The historicistic approach was attacked from several directions already in the last decades of the last century. The main arguments of the critics were that by denying the possibility of a systematic approach towards the past, and by preferring the particular and the individual at the expense of generalization, the historicistic approach was leading historical scholarship into subjectivity and relativism, which in the end makes the scientific study of the past impossible altogether (see Barraclough 1991: 11–13). The critics were and are anything but united in their suggestions of how to proceed from the historicistic deadlock. Salo W. Baron is undoubtedly right, when he argues that this lack of consensus in historical methodology among modern historians stems from the vast incursions of methodological elements from related disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, an-

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[2] Of historicism see, e.g. Sjöblom 1997: 131.

[3] Recensions I and II of the *Táin* are edited and translated by Cecile O'Rahilly (1967; 1976). Recension III is translated by Feargal Ó Béarra (1996: 47–65). The *Táin* is by far the most frequently discussed early Irish tale among Celtic scholars. A good starting point to the scholarship concerning the tale is, e.g. the articles included in *Ulidia*, the proceedings publication of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales (Mallory and Stockman1994).

thropology, archaeology, economics, and psychiatry. Among the different approaches to historical research those using philosophical, psychoanalytical and sociological methods found most support during the first decades of this century (Baron 1986: 38–50).

For example, the historian Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915) with his followers argued that historians should not simply describe past events, but use these events to trace and analyze cultural *ethoi* of different nations (Lamprecht 1971). His ideas have not gained wide support among most historians, but since the Second World War very similar claims have been put forward by the so-called psycho-historical school of thought, which mainly applies Freudian theory to historical explanation. The basic idea in psycho-historical research is to uncover certain less obvious aspects of the emotional life of certain individuals or collectives. One could say that at the present state of our knowledge, modern historians have difficulties in altogether ignoring psycho-historical scholarship, although they might agree with R. G. Collingwood that "it is not history, but natural science of a special kind" (Baron 1986: 50–58).[4]

A more influential critic came from the direction of sociology. According to it historians should turn their attention from the particular to the general, from events to uniformities, and from narrative to analysis (Barraclough 1991: 51). Especially in France the influence of the Durkheimian sociology has had great importance for historians. For example, Marc Bloch, one of the founding fathers of the Annales school, always admitted his debt to the Durkheimians and, more recently, Fernand Braudel, a student of Bloch, ranks Marcel Mauss among the scholars who have taught historians to grasp the past in its totality (see, e.g. Bloch 1954; Braudel 1980: 72; Strenski 1993: 78).

Historicism was also criticized among the newly established discipline of the history of religions.[5] The main argument of scholars like C.P. Tiele and the so-called German *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Sharpe 1986: 35; Rudolph 1992: 4–5) was that while the historicistic method of reconstructing past events might work in other realms of

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[4] The quotation from Collingwood is originally from his *The Idea of History* (1946) and quoted by Baron 1986: 51.
[5] In this article I use the term 'history of religions' only of the historical approaches of studying religions, not of the whole discipline of *Religionswissenchaft*, in which much more than only historical methods are included. Following the same logic I write of 'the historians of religion' meaning only those scholars who work using historical approaches in their research.

historical scholarship, it certainly did not inside theirs.[6] This was be-
cause the historians of religions were not interested in the past as
such, but only to the extent that past religious events and patterns of
religious behavior could reveal to them something about the nature of
religion, as a (metaphysical) universal concept. Typically, most of
these scholars, maybe because of their theological background,
turned therefore to classical phenomenology in order to supplement
the basic historical approach with more a more general framework,
and a mechanism enabling comparison between different religious
traditions with different spatio-temporal backgrounds (see, e.g. Tiele
1902-03: 1–20).

2. The "Comparative-Historical Approach": A Methodological Deadlock

This dialogue with phenomenology gave birth to the so-called religio-
historical[7] method, or the comparative-historical method, which has
been the trademark of our discipline. Although I do think that the
comparative-historical method has been, and still is, very useful in
illuminating the beliefs and religious practices of past cultures and
communities, there is a basic problem with this method. To begin
with, following the historicistic approach, the comparative-historical
method is said to be based not on any *a priori* categories but on em-
pirical evidence. Differing from the historicistic approach, the com-
parative-historical method is not satisfied simply to describe religious
behavior of the past, but it purports to understand it, as well
(Bianchi 1975: 3). Understanding requires interpretation, and inter-
pretation requires theory. Methodologically speaking, comparison can
be (and has been) made from several theoretical backgrounds, includ-
ing philological, sociological and psychological theories (see, e.g.

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[6] *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* is the name that was given to a group of
German Protestant theologians who consistently applied the historical
methods to the interpretation of the Bible. The school of thought originated
at the University of Göttingen and consisted of a number of students of Al-
brecht Ritschl with a critical attitude towards their teacher. The group was
made up of Hermann Gunkel, Wilhelm Bousset, Johannes Weiss, Ernst
Troeltsch, Wilhelm Wrede, Heinrich Hackmann, and Alfred Rahlf. See Ru-
dolph 1987: 293.
[7] Note that I use this term in a purely technical sense to distinguish the
methodological tradition of the history of religions from the methodological
traditions of other historical disciplines.

Paden 1988: 15–33). As argued above, historical scholarship in general has been aware of this since the early decades of this century, and historians have combined the theories and methods of neighboring sciences in order to produce the best possible result in each instance (Jenkins 1991: 26). Historians of religions make no exception (see Penner 1975: 52; Pakkanen 1996: 13). However, according to the historians of religion, what makes their work differ from the historical scholarship in its — so to say — profane state, is that it starts by presupposing and relying on the specific religious dimension of human existence (Pakkanen 1996: 13). All other forms of explanation are deemed reductionistic by the historians of religion.

Historians of religion might have a point here. After all, many psychological and sociological theories tend to view religion as a form of symbolic behavior concealing some more fundamental (and more "real") sociological or psychological functions and meanings. The anthropologist Pascal Boyer has ably pointed out that such interpretations are in sharp contrast to the views of the people studied (Boyer 1990: 46). After all, most peoples involved in religious communication would be very unhappy if they were told that in reality they are constructing social cohesion or building their self-esteem, even when they would be ready to admit that such meanings are included in the religious experience. However, problems arise when the historians of religions try to explicate what it exactly means to study religious behavior on its own terms, and what is meant by the "religious dimension" of human existence and when talking about methods of studying human behavior.

As stated above the resort to an *a priori* understanding of the concept of religion is closed to the historians of religions, as they want to hold fast to the empirical nature of their study. Instead, the interpretative framework is usually constructed through the principle of historical analogies. Forms of human behavior are analogically related to each other when they correspond in certain important respects but differ from another in other, equally important respects (Bianchi 1987: 401).

This methodological stance seems to imply that religion is a worldwide form of culture that needs to be understood before it is explained (see Paden 1992: 67). After all, how can we recognize our research object if we do not have at least a preliminary understanding of what we are looking for. But this is the same thing as to argue that historians of religions are equipped with some mysterious knowledge of religion which goes beyond the empirical historical data, and that this would be the reason why their explanations of religious behavior are in some very significant sense different from the explanations

that could be provided by other means. Naturally, this kind of argument is possible only if the *a priori* nature of religious behavior is accepted, so the principle of historical analogies is no way out of the methodological problems (Baird 1971: 6; Wiebe 1990: 209).

Moreover, recent studies especially on ritual behavior have made it perfectly clear that religious action is "no big deal" (Smith 1987: 195), and that they are in their general structure not at all extraordinary and, therefore, they can and should be explained in the more general framework of human behavior (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 6). If this is the case, the comparative-historical method appears to be in a deadlock, as it is paradoxical to assume that a concept of religion is at the same time a prerequisite for and a result of comparison.[8]

The concept of 'religion' as an analytical category is rooted in the academic milieu of the late nineteenth century Europe and it is motivated by a specific intellectual interest (see Sharpe 1986: 1–26; Bianchi 1987, 402). At the time it has undoubtedly been helping our discipline to achieve academic independence, but it has also differentiated our discipline from the general historical scholarship to the extent that most scholars, both historians and historians of religions, appear to be totally ignorant of the methodological and theoretical discussions and developments in the other field (see Penner 1989: 67).[9] But if religious behavior as a form of human behavior is nothing extraordinary, there should be no reasons why the history of religions could not — and should not — apply the same methods and same theoretical views in its research, as historians in general (see Rudolph 1993: 55–78).

3. History and Cognition

The situation has not gone unnoticed and several different solutions have been put forward. William Paden, for example, promotes a multidisciplinary approach, where methods and theories from different human and cultural sciences are combined in order to gain a

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[8] This deadlock, or "impasse" is discussed in more detail, for example, by Penner 1989.

[9] For the sake of fairness it should be reminded that this ignorance might not be as total as it looks. There are many examples from both sides that some overlapping exists. However, the well-attested lack of interest for theoretical and methodological discussions in all historical scholarship (an inheritance from historicism) has greatly enhanced the existing gap between these two fields of study. See, e.g. Thomas 1975: 91; Dray 1993, 1–7.

more complete picture of the research object (Paden 1988: 161–170; 1992: 125–135). On the other hand, as argued by Kurt Rudolph, since the 1960's new insights have also gained ground in historical scholarship in general and historians of religion could gain a lot simply by (so to say) bringing it all back home.[10] According to Rudolph, two fields especially, that of historical sociology developed by German historians and the historical anthropology of the French Annales-school, should be exploited to get new impulses in the historical study of religions (Rudolph 1993: 61–68).

Rudolph himself goes on to examine the impulses that can be found in the so called *historische Sozialwissenchaft* developed by German historians.[11] According to him the theoretical discussions of this school have presented clues to such old problems as the relation between 'understanding' and 'explaining'. In his discussion he mentions in passing also the French Annalists, but do not dwell in their contributions in any detail. In the rest of this article, my intention is to look more closely into the French tradition and to the impulses the so called *histoire des mentalités* can offer through its discussions concerning the relationships between human cognition and human acts for to what might be called a *cognitive history of religions*.

It is somewhat surprising that the history of mentalities have not gained much attention among the historians of religions, as they share many features which should make them appeal to each other. For example, studying cognition is something many historians find mystifying and dull. After all, historians claim to be dealing with empirical evidence which can be observed and reconstructed empirically, and human cognition is something which at first sight appears not to belong among such empirically observed entities. Recent advances in the applications of cognitive science to different areas of cultural studies, like linguistics, anthropology and psychology have clearly demonstrated that the first objection is more or less unfounded, and that there are a multitude of methods that can be used to reveal cognitive processes of the human mind. According to Jacques Le Goff, the founder and main promoter of the *histoire des men-*

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[10] I myself have made a similar claim later, but independently from Rudolph, as I was not aware of his article when I wrote mine. See Sjöblom 1997, 129–159.

[11] This tradition has its roots in the works of Max. Weber (see, e.g. Ketola, Pesonen and Sjöblom 1997: 94–96). In general one can say that different forms of historical sociology are the most popular approaches suggested for reformulating the theories and methods of the historical study of religions. See, e.g. Baron 1986: 66–94; Wiebe 1990: 205–220.

talités, historians have in this respect much to learn from other dis-
ciplines (Le Goff 1992: 97).[12]

For example, in modern linguistic theory a distinction is made be-
tween the speaker's competence (what he knows about the language)
and what he does (performance) (see Chomsky 1971: 73). Both of
these are present in any particular linguistic performance, and a
satisfactory explanation of linguistic performances requires that both
competence and performance are taken into account. According to Le
Goff, this model of explanation can be extended to historical analysis,
as well, where the distinction can be drawn between the historical
event (or performance) and the *mentality* influencing and framing
that event. The last mentioned is the object of study for the history of
mentalities.[13] In my mind this model is very close to the implicit
methodological assumptions made by most of the historians of relig-
ions in their efforts to explain and understand religious behavior.

Additionally, historians often claim that as cognitive science is
promoting a theoretical and universal approach it is incompatible
with historical scholarship, which according to them is more inter-
ested in the uniqueness of different cultural processes and forms of
behavior (Buckley and Buckley 1995: 343–352). Both historians of
religions, and historians of mentalities make an exception. As stated
above, many historians of religion argue for the existence of a univer-
sal religious dimension shared by all people alike. Applying the
theories of structural and biological anthropology, historians of men-
talities, in their turn, argue for the existence of universal and shared
structures of mentalities, based on the basic biological nature of hu-
man existence (see, e.g. Ginzburg 1986: 62–63; Dressel 1996: 29–
62).[14] They also claim that the background culture constrains the

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[12] There is no good translation for the French word *mentalité* in English. Ac-
cording to Michael Gismondi the English term 'mentality' is semantically
close to *mentalité*, but differs from it in some essential points.(Gismondi
1985: 211–230). Still, for the sake of simplicity, 'history of mentalities' is the
chosen English translation of *histoire des mentalités* in this study.

[13] An early and impressive example of research in "Le Goffian" paradigm is
Georges Duby's *Le Dimanche de Bouvine* (1973), where the writer considers
both the actual battle of Bouvines and the memory it has left behind.

[14] The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg is the leading representative of the
so-called 'microhistorical' research. He himself want's to make a clear dis-
tinction between microhistorians and historians of mentalities. However,
their research objects are largely the same – the human mind, and both are
much influenced by anthropology, especially the works of Claude Lévi-
Strauss. Moreover, Ginzburg also writes that the basis of microhistorical
research is in the history of mentalities. Ginzburg 1996: 177–181.

ways humans view the world, an argument also familiar to anthro-
pologists, and the existence of cultural constraints frames the cogni-
tive processes available in any single group of peoples. Thus, like the
constraints born from the use of a shared language, a shared tradi-
tion with all its differing aspects, creates constraints for cognizing
the surrounding world (see Le Goff 1987: 1–35). This approach does
not require the use of such higher-level categories as 'religion' in the
explanation of different forms of cultural behavior. Nevertheless, as
cognitive processes follow more or less universal patterns, historians
of mentalities can still hold fast to the heuristic value of the com-
parative method which they are using. In this respect they have an
apparent advantage over the historians of religions, who stubbornly
cling to the outdated ways creating heuristic concepts for analyzing
religious behavior.

The basic problem with the history of mentalities is that its under-
standing of the concept of 'mentality' is imprecise to the extent of
making historical writing impressionistic (Gismondi 1985: 229–230;
Winberg 1970, 15). As a scholarly concept it appears to defy clear
definitions. For example, Gert Dressel defines mentalities as "frames
of mind that include the whole repertoire of possible representations,
thought patterns, senses, meanings and perceptions used in the cog-
nizing processes of world construction" (see Dressel 1996: 264), and
one of the many definitions given by Le Goff himself is that mentali-
ties are "the quotidian and the automatic, that which eludes the in-
dividual subjects of history because it throws a light in the imper-
sonal content of their thought" (Le Goff 1974: 85). What these defini-
tions really mean for a construction of meaningful methodology in
historical scholarship is a moot point.

This vagueness is partly deliberate. According to Jacques Le Goff
the imprecision of the term may be its strongest attribute, as it
makes possible a very reflective approach towards very different
kinds of materials and research problems (Le Goff 1974: 84–86).
However, to grasp 'mentalities' as something "embracing what is not
formulated, what remains apparently "insignificant" as well as what
remains deeply buried at the level of unconscious motivations"
(Gismondi 1985: 229), does not mean that the concept itself should be
placed outside empirical discussions, in the same quasi-autonomous
class of cultural artifacts, where 'religion', 'politics' and other com-
parative concepts are usually also placed. The central problem born
from this imprecise use of 'mentality' is that the historians of men-
talities use the term to refer sometimes to an innate and tacit cogni-
tive frame and at other times to its products whose forms it con-
strains. Surly, it is the products that historians of mentalities are

more interested in, but I would like to argue that their reluctance to
offer clear descriptions of the nature of 'mentalities' has severely in-
validated the case of the historians of mentalities.

4. Towards a Cognitive History of Religions

It appears that the best way to approach Le Goff's 'mentality' is to
connect it with what in anthropology has been referred to as 'cultural
models'. Cultural models have been one of the basic objects of study
in cognitive anthropology since the pioneering work of Lévi-Strauss.
Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland define them as 'presupposed,
taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared
(although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative mod-
els) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in
their understanding of that world and their behavior in it (Quinn and
Holland 1987: 4). In a similar vein, Le Goff writes that the same in-
dividuals operate on the basis of different mentalities in different
contextual situations. As an example he mentions the French king
Louis XI, who according to Le Goff, shows in his political thinking "a
modern, "machiavellian" mentality", but in his religious life is bound
by an "superstitious, extremely traditional mentality" (Le Goff 1978:
256). The important point with cultural models is that they should
not be understood as some kind of norms which every individual in
the society has to follow, but as limiting cases constraining the
amount of choices of cognitive acts possible in a given culture
(Sperber 1996: 106). Thus, contradictory acts and beliefs are quite
possible inside one cultural models, as they only frame experience
and its interpretations instead of restricting one to follow a preor-
dained path of cognitive deduction (Quinn and Holland 1987: 6;
Boyer 1994: 21–28).[15]

If we want to look for differences between 'mentalities' and 'cultural
models', the basic difference is the same as that between anthropol-
ogy and history. The first mentioned is usually more interested in
synchronical processes, and cultural models are therefore usually
constructed from a network of cultural information existing in a syn-
chronical relationship with each other. Historians, on the other hand,
are more interested in diachronical processes, and mentalities are

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[15] A good collection of historical studies using the theories and methods of
cognitive science and the concept of 'cultural models' is, e.g. Olson and Tor-
rance 1996.

constructed from a background of cultural information existing in a diachronical relationship to each other (see Augé 1995: 7–18).

If historians of mentalities are studying cultural models of the past, the cognitive historians of religions are in their turn studying religious models.[16] It goes without saying that the line between these two areas is fuzzy, due to the above mentioned lack of commonly accepted definition of how the concept of 'religion' should be defined. However, as a general rule, one could argue that the historians of religions are focusing on those mentalities which are constructed from the "peculiar conceptual commitments which characterize religion generally" (see Lawson and McCauley 1990: 79). For scholars working in the neo-Tylorian vain this simply means mentalities operating with culturally postulated superhuman agents (see Penner 1989:7; Lawson and McCauley 1990: 5). In many respects this definition is more than satisfactory from the viewpoint of historical scholarship. After all, a large portion of the sources of working historians of religions consists of narrational, philosophical, ritual, etc. descriptions of such agents, and certainly they play a part in most of the cultural traditions known to us. However, personally I do not find this definition entirely satisfactory, as I believe that much religious behavior can be performed without any necessary involvement of superhuman agents. A more useful definition for religious mentalities would therefore be those cultural models which involves representations based on counterintuitive claims, as discussed by Pascal Boyer (Boyer 1994: 29–60).

From this perspective, the history of religions would methodologically be something like a specialized branch of the history of mentalities, and it would be necessary for them to work in close relationship, as applying cognitive approaches to cultural materials always relies on the principle of holism, that is, that all cultural representations should be viewed as parts of the cognitive network system they are found in (see, e.g. Penner 1994: 977–996). A methodological and theoretical dependency on other historical disciplines does not mean that the academic study of religions would have to loose its academic autonomy. Academic disciplines change, as do their subject-matters, and the historians of religions have already for a long time been applying methods and theories from other cultural studies in their

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[16] The theory of religious models and a very preliminary suggestion of the principles of defining them are available in Pyysiäinen 1988: 87–97. It is a good starting point for a general discussion concerning the relationship of cultural- and religious models, although it more or less ignores cognitive approaches and discussions on the topic.

work. The autonomy of an academic discipline is therefore not a
question of theoretical and methodological independence, but a politi-
cal question (see Strenski 1994: 105–107). On the contrary, relying
on problematic *a priori* notions and understandings concerning the
subject-matter of our discipline is in the end doing much more harm
in what comes to the scholarly values of our research work and, more
dangerously, it certainly keeps us from truly grasping the essential
features and the diverse nature of our topic(s) of research.

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