

# TEMENOS

---

NORDIC JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

---

VOLUME 51 No. 2

---



THE FINNISH SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

---

2015

The journal is supported by  
Nordic Board for Periodicals in the  
Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Copyright © 2015 by the Finnish Society for the Study of Religion

ISSN 2342-7256

TEMENOS  
NORDIC JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION  
Volume 51 No. 2

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE HUMANISTIC STUDY OF RELIGION IN SWEDEN

CONTENTS

---

EDITORIAL NOTE 155

ARTICLES

DAVID THURFJELL  
The dissolution of the history of religions: Contemporary challenges of a humanities  
discipline in Sweden 161

JONAS SVENSSON  
Religious education and teaching young people about humanity:  
Suggesting a new role for RE and for the academic study of religions in Sweden 177

SUSANNE OLSSON & LEIF STENBERG  
Engaging the history of religions – from an Islamic studies perspective 201

STEFAN ARVIDSSON  
The humanistic study of religions: An obscure tradition illuminated  
by the ‘Knights of Labor’ 225

PETER JACKSON  
A guest at the table of the gods: Religion and the origins of academic life 255

BOOK REVIEWS

Cora Alexa Døving and Siv Ellen Kraft: *Religion i pressen*. (OLAV HOVDELIEN) 275

Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer and David A. Warburton (eds):  
*The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*. (VISA IMMONEN) 278

James L. Cox (ed.): *Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions*. (BJØRN OLA TAFJORD) 282

Anna Sun: *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*.  
(TEEMU TAIRA) 288



## Editorial note: Locating the humanistic within the study of religions

I took my first class in the history of religions at a Swedish university in the spring of 1990. Study within the discipline was at that time a profoundly humanistic endeavour. Teachers and students were principally interested in subjects on the borders of literature, arts, history, and philosophy. Keen interest was taken in, for example, Egyptian death symbolism, Zen absurdity, and Palaeolithic hunting magic. Mircea Eliade was still revered. Much has changed since then. Among the reasons for this are the new global religio-political situation, with 'fundamentalist' violence and 'the return of religions' in politics, varying intellectual trends in universities, and, at least in Sweden, changes affecting the student population's economic situation, general knowledge interests, and their overall motivation for studying religion (today future teachers dominate the history/study of religion lecture room).

The major reorientation that these changes have brought with them has admittedly resulted in several improvements, such as sharper demystifying, more critical perspectives on religious discourse, scholars (chiefly in Islamic studies) working more closely with journalists and state officials, and, perhaps, more scientifically rigid analyses thanks to a greater use of social-scientific methods. However, this reorientation brings with it certain concerns that are, I think, obvious for any historian/scholar of religions. Among these we should mention the limitation of the source material to chiefly contemporary cases, the tedious use of discourse analysis and sociological models, students' inclination towards studying 'their own' tradition and popular culture, the lack of (time for) interest in close analysis of languages and semiotic systems, the decline in philosophical ways of debating and not only a fading curiosity concerning historically unknown religions, but also a general decline in the students' sense that 'the past is a foreign country' (to use the title of David Lowenthal's famous book). An easy way to describe this reorientation is to claim that the humanistic element of the history/study of religions has shrunk. As a consequence, Swedish scholars of religions have occasionally discussed the nature of this humanistic element and disputed its merit within the general study of religion and culture. This special volume of *Temenos* is an outcome of these discussions. Before the reader, who has, I am sure, encountered similar discussions and debates in their own country, turns the pages of these contributions by Swedish historians of religions I would like, as an appetiser, to indicate the different

locations within the scholarship process in which the humanistic essence may be uncovered.

First, we might identify the humanistic in the scholar's general knowledge interest. This is what historian Richard Schlatter had to say about this matter in the 1960s:

The job of the humanist scholar is to organize our huge inheritance of culture, to make the past available to the present, to make the whole of civilization available to men who necessarily live in one small corner for one little stretch of time, and finally to judge, as a critic, the actions of the present by the experience of the past. [...] He must sift the whole of man's culture again and again, reassessing, reinterpreting, rediscovering, translating into a modern idiom, making available the materials and the blueprints with which his contemporaries can build their own culture, bringing to the center of the stage that which a past generation has judged irrelevant but which is now again usable, sending into storage that which has become, for the moment, too familiar and too habitual to stir our imagination, preserving it for a posterity to which it will once more seem fresh. The humanist does all this by the exercise of exact scholarship. He must have the erudition of the historian, the critical abilities of the philosopher, the objectivity of the scientist, and the imagination of all three. (Schlatter 1963, vii)

Schlatter's plea for a humanistic scholarship intentionally and directly contributing to cultural and political issues would probably gain few supporters in academia (despite the huge success of Norman Fairclough's 'critical discourse analysis', which explicitly shares his aims). Most scholars would surely agree that it should not be our objective either to produce cultural visions, ideologies, and ethical standards or to create and evaluate art. One might ask, however, given that it is considered worthwhile to supply facts and theories for government bodies, diplomatic reports, law enforcement assessments, and journalism why we should not aim also to contribute to philosophical problems, artistic designs, literary essays, new views of life, and palliative meditations in the manner of earlier generations (one thinks here of Max Müller, Söderblom, Frazer, and Eliade). It might even be the case that the history/study of religions would aid progress (to consciously use a vague notion) more efficiently if we did *not* produce knowledge relevant to the contemporary socio-political condition and instead clung to knowledge that was for the most part irrelevant for society yet relevant for

culture. Perhaps people living amidst today's capitalist whirlwind of work, commodities, and money, 'find their ways home' more with the help of Native American mythology than they do when they have more information about the religio-political situation in the Middle East. This does not have to be an argument for escapism, but, as R. J. Reilly put it in referring to Tolkien's fantasy literature, 'a time to regroup one's forces for the next day's battle (1969, 147)'.

This leads us in any case to the most basic question: how do we justify our work? Has humanism as an ideological movement anything to do with it? For example, having read Bruce Lincoln's shrewd analysis in *Religion, Empire, Torture* (2007) of why American soldiers humiliated the Abu Ghraib prisoners, which, instead of portraying them as outright bastards, shows that, in dehumanising prisoners with the aid of a perverse kind of theatre, they tried desperately to persuade themselves that American propaganda was trustworthy, the reader surely receives an injection of humanistic sensibility. Is this what a humanistic study (though Lincoln himself would sternly reject that term as naive) is all about? There have been many scholars, however, driven by deeply anti-humanistic sentiments who have contributed profoundly to the humanistic study of religions.

Is a humanist perhaps interested in something other than man as citizen? Phenomena that are not characteristic of the regular functioning of a society, such as madness, masturbation, solitary prayer, art made solely for one self, the work of unique genius, and mysticism remain important objects of study for the humanities. Is this because we are primarily interested in humans as cultural creatures and not as social beings?

An alternative might be to look for the humanistic dimension in the philosophy of science, but does the humanistic enterprise rest on different philosophical foundations than the social and natural sciences? Terms such as methodological empathy and *Verstehen* seem opposed to the critical nature of science, but what exactly does 'critical' mean? Might it be more important to have a sympathetic approach to the object, at least if the phenomenon has been marginalised and misrepresented throughout history? Such a humanistic project seems to presuppose the existence of human nature: after all, if we want to talk about 'oppression', 'exploration', or 'alienation', do these concepts not imply that we can compare the existing human being with an ideal and potential human being?

Perhaps, then, the essence of the humanities has to do with methodology. Is it against the spirit of the humanities to do questionnaires? Do humanist scholars analyse texts differently from others? What of the significance of

'privileged details', once argued by Carlo Ginzburg as the typical humanistic object? Should a talented scholar of the humanities be able to predict the downfall of American civilisation by the shape of a doorknob, as Adorno once did? Interpretation may have a role in every pursuit of knowledge. It might, however, be argued that the study of the metal in a Volkswagen (and the metallurgic process and the specific metal composition used in its production) is not part of the humanities, but that the study of its colour and style is. The reason for this is simply that colour and style, in contrast to the physical aspect of a thing, need to be interpreted.

It could also be the case that a humanist methodology is reflected in a special style of writing. Is not the ability to vividly re-describe a human situation, to express an accomplished sensibility about the emotions and thought of a group of people, as well as having an eye for details and patterns, a *sine que non* for the humanist? Is it not possible to judge whether a scholar has a profound knowledge of a cultural situation by the scholar's use of adjectives (the people in a photo, for example, express either 'wrath' or 'remorse')?

Finally, we should ask ourselves if there is something unique about which the humanities are theorising. The obsession with thinking within the fashionable cognitive sciences is a consequence of the diminishing role of the humanities, but are we not in need of more heart than head research? In *War's Unwomanly Face* the winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for literature Svetlana Alexievich states: 'I'm not interested in events in themselves – I am aiming at the emotional events (2012, 20).' The mission for the humanities might then be 'to see history as changes in sensibilities and style or, more, how different classes of people mobilized their emotional energies and adopted different moral postures (1962, 440)', to use a phrase from Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology*. Wherever we are inclined to locate what is humanistic in scholarly work, I am convinced that the questions about the relationships between the humanities, the social and natural sciences, and the cultural and political spheres of society are in urgent need of some contemporary rejoinders.

Stefan Arvidsson  
Guest Editor



**Aleksievič, Svetlana Aleksandrovna**

2012 *Kriget har inget kvinnligt ansikte: en utopias röster*. Stockholm: Ersatz.

**Bell, Daniel**

1962 *The end of ideology: on the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*. Cambridge, mass.: Harvard university press.

**Lincoln, Bruce**

2007 *Religion, empire, and torture: the case of Achaemenian Persia, with a post-script on Abu Ghraib*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Reilly, R.J.**

1969 Tolkien and the Fairy-Story – Isaacs, Neil D. & Rose A. Zimbardo (eds) *Tolkien and the Critics. Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, 128–50. London: University of Notre Dame Press.

**Richard Schlatter**

1963 Introduction to the series – Holbrook, Clyde Amos, *Religion, a humanistic field*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.



# The dissolution of the history of religions: Contemporary challenges of a humanities discipline in Sweden

DAVID THURFJELL

*Södertörn University*

## Abstract

The discipline of History of religions has changed in Sweden over the latest decades. Its traditional connection to text and language has weakened and its emphasis shifted towards social and contemporary aspects of religion. In this article the societal trends and the reforms in Swedish university politics that lie behind this change are pinpointed and discussed. It is argued that the transformation has been twofold. On the one hand the discipline has grown considerably and expanded into empirical fields, methods, and theories that were alien to it only twenty-five years ago. On the other it has been forced to adjust to a political climate focused on direct social relevance, measurability, and quantifiable efficiency. The article presents the transformation as consisting in four parallel processes labelled the efficiency turn, the altered knowledge contract, the replacement by *religionsvetenskap*, and the loss of prestige, respectively.

*Keywords: History of Religion, Religionsvetenskap, Knowledge contract, New Public management*

As a discipline the history of religions has traditionally been strongly rooted in the humanities. Historians of religion in the Uppsala tradition in which I was trained used to think of themselves as scholars of text and language. The historian of religion was expected and required to learn the language of the sources with which he or she worked, and the most obvious scholarly partners of the discipline were found among specialists in the languages and histories of the regions studied. When I was a PhD candidate in the 1990s, our seminars were frequented by Indologists, Iranists, Egyptologists, and Greek and Latin scholars, depending on the topics discussed. I cannot, however, recall a seminar ever being visited by a sociologist or an anthropologist, or any other social scientist for that matter.

It is clear that this has changed. Today the connection with text and language is much weaker within our discipline. In a forthcoming study on Swedish doctoral dissertations in the history of religions during the last two

decades Lena Roos shows that the scholarly emphasis has clearly shifted towards the social and contemporary aspects of religion (Roos, forthcoming). I believe it is difficult to identify a single reason for this. As always such developments are the result of a number of different processes. However, in what follows I shall try to pinpoint a number of policy changes and societal trends that, taken together, may help elucidate what has happened. The purpose of this article is therefore to provide a description and analysis of the societal and political changes that have led to the transformation of the history of religions discipline in Sweden. Needless to say, the transformation that has taken place in Sweden is not isolated to this country. The situation of the humanities is being discussed in many countries, and many of the trends that I will pinpoint here have their parallels in many of these (Holm, Scott & Jarrick 2015) Focussing on the Swedish case I shall here attempt to explain why these changes have occurred. I have divided my analysis into four sections: the efficiency turn; the altered knowledge contract; the replacement of the history of religions by *religionsvetenskap*; and the loss of prestige.

### **The efficiency turn**

The development of the history of religions does not take place in a societal vacuum. On the contrary, the development within our discipline reflects changes that are taking place in society at large, both in Sweden and internationally. One change in this respect certainly lies in the general turn towards quantifiable efficiency and measurability in society as a whole. In academic life these higher demands for transparency and quantifiable productivity have resulted in a situation where universities can no longer uphold or encourage long-term educational programmes in fields of unclear economic value. The result is that small humanities disciplines suffer a languishing existence and find themselves branded as dysfunctional and ineffective. In the Swedish system this trend – sometimes referred to as New Public Management – has been implemented through a number of administrative reforms of the university system. Three such reforms, all of which were introduced in the 1990s, have had an especially big impact: the HÅS/HÅP reform; the Bologna Process; and the Tham reform.

HÅS and HÅP are abbreviations for ‘full-year student’ (*helårsstudent*) and ‘full-year performance’ (*helårsprestation*) respectively. In the early 1990s, when Per Unckel was Minister of Education, the right wing government introduced a performance-based funding system for education. In this new system universities became eligible for government funding not only on

the basis of how many students had registered on their courses (HÅS), but also whether or not these students passed them (HÅP). Not only was the potential for universities to succumb to the temptation to lower the standards expected of students to access more funding inherent in this system; there was also a built-in economic and competitive logic that, arguably, brought about a situation where the benefit and usefulness of academic courses started being measured in terms of popularity and profitability.

Universities in Sweden are free to dispose of government funding as they see fit, but the system's default setting is that courses that attract a certain number of successful students are allowed to continue, while courses that attract fewer students have to close. As a result the supply of academic competence loses vision and becomes vulnerable to the whimsies of popular culture, instead of being based – as would be preferable – on broad and thoughtful consideration of the kind of competences our society needs.

Needless to say, the new system has an especially forceful impact on disciplines with few students. It also hits the humanities and social sciences particularly hard, because the allowance price tag for students in these fields is significantly lower than it is for those in the natural sciences, for instance. However, the freedom to reallocate funds between different faculties gives the universities a way to level out this inequality. At most universities some of the funds received to cover the costs for courses in other faculties are reallocated to cover the costs of underfinanced humanities courses. The problem with this system, however, is that it creates a situation where the humanities, given the unequal subsidies, are dependent on other, better funded, fields. This increases the impression that humanities departments – although they only receive some five per cent of the tax allocated to education and research – are dysfunctional environments that are unable to carry their own costs.

The Bologna Process is a political programme that aims to strengthen European higher education by standardising the university systems of the forty-seven countries involved. According to the Bologna Declaration of 1999 one of the three main goals of its reform programme for European higher education is to promote *employability*. This is defined as: 'the ability to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market' (Ellström 2010, 17-8). It is difficult to argue against the usefulness of this ambition where the majority of educational programmes is concerned. The universal application of the employability ideal to all courses and programmes, however, reflects a limited understanding of the purpose of knowledge. Courses about, say, medieval Russian literature, or ancient

Greek drama, or, for that matter, specific subdivisions of botany, do not ultimately serve the purpose of creating a more efficient or flexible workforce, but cater to our human desire for knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our world. Many disciplines within the humanities primarily serve to satisfy this need. A system that forces them to articulate their usefulness in terms of employability therefore falls short of highlighting the potential of these disciplines. 'Not since the days of Karl Marx,' remarks the historian of ideas Sverker Sörlin about this development, 'have science and education been defined so one dimensionally as a productive force as they have been in recent decades' research and education politics.' (Ekström & Sörlin 2012, my translation)

The much debated Tham reform of 1997/1998 is a third important example of the efficiency drive of Swedish university administration. Carl Tham was a Social Democratic Minister of Education who changed the law concerning Swedish PhD education, making it impossible to be a PhD student for more than four fully funded years. With this reform all doctoral candidates became the employees, rather than merely the students of their universities. For a discipline like the history of religions, where many PhD students hitherto had been part-time students earning their living through other employment, the Tham reform entailed a major change, because the number of affiliated scholars that the different research environments could involve was dramatically decreased. The reform also meant that it became practically impossible to pursue a career as a traditional language-oriented historian of religion at a Swedish university if you did not already have the language qualifications needed. Before the Tham reform people used to spend decades writing their PhD theses. With the new system the limit of four years was fixed, and PhD candidates had to squeeze in up to two years of reading courses that only exceptionally included language.

I am not saying that the HÅS/HÅP system, the Bologna Process, and the Tham reform have been entirely negative for our discipline. They have also had many benefits. Nevertheless, they are concrete expressions of the general political and societal efficiency drive in our university system and they have all, in differing ways, hindered the history of religions in continuing as it always had.

The reforms and the general quest for measurable efficiency in society have forced historians of religion to find other ways of pursuing their research. The discipline has had to be more socially relevant, more popular among students, and it has had to be learnt more quickly. The obvious solution has been to shift the focus from the inaccessible ancient scriptures,

requiring as they do a facility in foreign languages, to texts and data with no language barrier. Inevitably the focus has now shifted to contemporary languages and more accessible material.

It is worth mentioning that this change of focus also coincided – or perhaps brought with it – a new kind of theory with its own new focus to our discipline. It should perhaps be acknowledged that when the study material became more accessible, the scholarly analysis of it needed to be more advanced. Previously it was considered a scholarly achievement in its own right to make hitherto inaccessible material available. To find and translate an unknown manuscript from a foreign language could in itself be a large element of a PhD project. This is to a much lesser extent the case today. Instead, the last two decades have brought about a theorisation of our discipline, and much of the theory that has been introduced has come from the social sciences. It may even be possible to speak of a sociologisation of our discipline over the last two decades. I remember a lecture by the late Professor Jan Bergman in Uppsala in the autumn of 1994: ‘In this discipline,’ the professor told us jokingly, ‘it used to be said that theory is for those who know nothing for real,’ and he added: ‘But that is not how we view it today.’ Bergman was himself theoretically well-read and broad in his approach, and I believe he welcomed the change of attitude about which he was informing us. Nevertheless, his statement serves as an illustration that something was about to change in the mid-1990s.

This, then, is one way of telling the story of the last two decades of our discipline. It is, however, not the only way. The administrative changes alone cannot explain this development. I shall therefore now focus on another aspect of the societal development during the same period.

### **An altered knowledge contract**

Swedish sociologist Mats Benner has argued that in recent decades we have witnessed a thorough renegotiation of the knowledge contract between the state and universities, both in Sweden and in many other European countries (Benner 2001). Although the Swedish picture is a little ambiguous, the development can be described as a crisis for the traditional Humboldtian university ideal. At the core of that ideal lies the eighteenth century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion of *Bildung* and the idea that higher education serves the purpose, not only of educating people as competent civil servants, but of forming them in a holistic way as fully fledged, learned, intellectual, and culturally versatile citizens. It is this idea that,

since the nineteenth century, has constituted the motivation for supporting costly state-funded education in disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and the history of religions, and it is this ideal that has defined the task and meaning of the universities as institutions for the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual formation of the people. In the 1960s this ideal gained new strength in Europe as progressive political movements – as part of an overall ambition to deconstruct and renew society – expanded the humanities at many European universities.

The last two decades bear witness to a change in attitude and a return to a pre-Humboldtian – or at least a pre-1960s – view of higher education. *Bildung* is no longer a buzzword in Swedish university politics or administration (except, of course, among those who oppose the general development). Instead, as the administrative reforms previously mentioned illustrate, the existence of the university seems to be thought of as stemming from its immediate and direct usefulness to society and, of course, predominantly on the basis of its ability to help create the right conditions for economic growth.

All in all this development has placed the classical philological history of religions in a precarious situation. It is hard to imagine a discipline whose *raison d'être* is more firmly based on an appreciation of *Bildung* rather than on economic efficiency and direct societal relevance. It is therefore unsurprising that this particular type of scholarship has had to swim against the current in recent decades. Scholars are no longer asked to produce knowledge for its own sake, but to provide information and analyses that are immediately useful.

It is important to stress that the disappearance of the *Bildung* ideal has less to do with a loss of appreciation than with a loss of understanding of it. Open disregard for the humanities is rare in Sweden. The debate has seen some expressions of open hostility towards the value of knowledge about history, philosophy, and literature – perhaps the most flagrant of which was a report from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svenskt näringsliv*) entitled 'The Art of Messing up a Life' (*Konsten att strula till ett liv*), in which it was suggested that career-inefficient humanities courses should not offer students grants at the same level as other, more societally beneficial, courses. This report was, however, an exception and, as a 2014 Norwegian report about this issue has indicated, open hostility is rare (Rem & Jordheim 2014). On the contrary, most institutions and voices in the public debate are positive in their view of the humanities. No one can challenge the importance of knowledge in history, language, and culture. Indeed, competence in these fields is highly regarded by most. The problem for the humanities, it seems,



lies not in lack of appreciation but in system changes that in indirect ways have marginalised the field. Perhaps these changes are the product of an inability to articulate how the traditional knowledge of the humanities can be accepted as meaningful by our result-oriented climate of debate. As the Norwegian report pointed out, many are eager to voice their endorsement of the humanities, but few are able to articulate exactly how they are useful (Rem & Jordheim 2014).

This lack of concrete arguments is connected with the marginalisation of the humanities in today's Sweden. I have already mentioned that humanities scholars do not have the position in the media that they once had: they are rarely called in as experts; and fewer and fewer editorial writers in Swedish newspapers have a humanities background. Humanities elements are also poorly represented in non-humanities education. Education programmes in medicine, economy, and law contain few or no humanities elements at most Swedish universities, and if there are courses – in moral philosophy for example – they are often voluntary. Similarly, a qualification in the humanities is not valued when young people are looking for employment, and reports show that humanities faculties enjoy the lowest trust among the Swedish public (VA-rapport 2015, 9). There are also few political research visions for the humanities. The eighty billion euro research programme *Horizon 2020*, launched by the European Commission in 2014, has been severely criticised for the way it treats the humanities, and in the latest bills concerning Swedish research the humanities have barely been mentioned.

Where the history of religion is concerned, scholars and PhD students have been forced by these trends to try to identify the societal issues where knowledge about religion can be helpful and to steer their research in that direction. This is certainly a rather different criterion than, I imagine, Geo Widengren had in mind when he chose *Ancient Accadian Psalms of Lamentation* as the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Nevertheless, this has been a strong development in our discipline, and I think it is safe to argue that it has helped to instigate an increased focus on contemporary and politically topical matters. Of course, the development in world politics has also been significant in this development. In the last two decades religion has been restored to the societal agenda in a way many have found surprising. The challenges presented by a more religious multiculturalism in Sweden and the growth in the apparent presence of religio-political groups and conflicts in world politics has made religion more topical than ever. Scholars of religion have thus found that their services are called for in a different way, and that they have been asked to shift the focus of their knowledge to topical issues.

### Replaced by religionsvetenskap

Another development that has unquestionably contributed to the transformation of the history of religions in Sweden is the growth and, to a certain extent, the replacement of the history of religions by the *study* of religions, *religionsvetenskap*. To a large extent this growth has been a result of the general expansion of the Swedish university sector, which has led to the establishment of a number of new Swedish universities and colleges over the last two decades. As religious education is a school subject in Sweden, and teacher education has been an important part of the curriculum of many new universities, these new universities have had to introduce religious studies. It is striking that these new environments at all new universities have been labelled, not as departments of the history of religion or theology, but as departments of *religionsvetenskap*.

Now, *religionsvetenskap* is a contested term in Swedish academic life. Some, including myself, see it as the Swedish equivalent of the German *Religionswissenschaft*, that is, as a multidisciplinary and non-confessional discipline dedicated to the academic study of different religions and religion as a phenomenon. Those who hold this position have been keen on maintaining a border between *religionsvetenskap* and *theology*, where the latter is seen as having a constructive, prescriptive, and possibly confessional component that the former lacks. The distinction between *religionsvetenskap* and *theology* is reflected in the name of some of the largest academic formations where these disciplines are present, for instance, the *Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap* (CTR) at Lund University, or the Department for *religionsvetenskap och teologi* at Gothenburg University. In other places, most notably at Uppsala University, however, this distinction has not been made as clearly.

Among historians of religion the ambiguity that surrounds the term *religionsvetenskap* has given rise to mixed feelings. On the one hand many, including myself, now find themselves in *religionsvetenskap* positions rather than positions linked with the history of religions. Some scholars have expressed a desire for a coherent approach to such labelling, arguing that the discipline of *religionsvetenskap* should be regarded as synonymous with the history of religions. At the same time, many are hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace the term *religionsvetenskap*, because it has ambiguous connotations that may blur the boundary with theology. In the Swedish Association for the History of Religions (SSRF) there is a debate on whether or not the organisation should change its name to The Association for *Religionsvetenskap* rather than for the *History of Religions*. This has not happened, but the continuing debate reflects the ambivalence that many scholars feel in relation to these labels.

Thus, many historians of religion now struggle with whether or not to identify with the field of *religionsvetenskap*, and opinions differ about how the word *religionsvetenskap* relates to theology. It is clear, however, that the connotations of *religionsvetenskap* are broader than those of the history of religions. *Religionsvetenskap* is, de facto, a discipline that encompasses a number of different methods and scholarly approaches. Even setting aside its ambiguous relationship with theology, it is correct to think of it as a multidisciplinary field that can be divided into a number of subdisciplines. Some scholars of *religionsvetenskap* work as historians, others conduct quantitative sociological surveys, others are more to be compared with philosophers, and still others with anthropologists or psychologists. Today, with the growth of cognitive studies of religion, some of us are even most closely affiliated with neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists. Our discipline thus has no obvious faculty to which it can belong.

As far as the transformation of the history of religions is concerned, this change means that many scholars who received their doctoral degree as historians of religion find themselves riding many horses. I am myself an example here. I received my master's degree in the history of religions and Iranian languages; my doctoral degree was in the history of religions but obtained from a theological faculty; I obtained a position as a lecturer in *religionsvetenskap*, and later earned my docentship and professorship in this discipline. I now work at a department with fifteen scholars (including PhD students) of whom only two, or perhaps three, would identify as historians of religion.

Needless to say, this has meant that the border between the history of religions and disciplines like missiology, the history of Christianity, and the sociology of religion has become more blurred. As long as historians of religion were organised in cohesive departments or subdepartments that limited themselves to work on ancient and non-Christian religions, the division of labour was quite clear. Now, for good and ill, we find ourselves absorbed into a discipline that is wider in its focus and more calibrated to the demands of society.

### **A loss of prestige**

It seems clear, then, that the transformation of historians of religion into contemporarily-oriented and sociologically inclined scholars of *religionsvetenskap* has diminished the humanities identity that once dominated the discipline. In general the field has become more social scientific, less lan-

guage and *Bildung*-oriented, and more focused on contemporary issues. The obvious response to this observation is, so what? Why is this development problematic? Is it not positive that our discipline has been able to transform itself in accordance with the changes and new requirements of society? These questions are related to the much debated idea of a crisis in the humanities and to the unresolved question of whether such a crisis exists at all.

The answer to that question, of course, depends on how one defines what a crisis is. As Geoffrey Harpham points out in his *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (2011), discussions about a crisis for the humanities is as old as the humanities themselves. As early as the 1940s there were reports of a crisis in language disciplines in the United States, and since the 1960s, when the humanities boomed in both Europe and America, reports about the imminent crisis it faces have been frequent. In Germany Helmut Reinalter wrote in 2011 about the *Krise der Geisteswissenschaften* even as the same country was producing two and a half thousand doctoral dissertations in the field every year. In Sweden it is similarly difficult to argue for a crisis based on quantitative measures of output: such figures, it seems, point in the opposite direction.

In this connection it is important to remember that although there have been some negative developments for the humanities in Sweden, the overall picture is quite positive, at least when it is compared with many of our neighbouring countries. The last two decades have entailed a stronger focus on efficiency and economical usefulness, but they have also brought a large expansion in the number of positions, educational programmes, and in the research funding for the humanities in this country. The vast expansion of the university sector during the 1990s has also entailed a hitherto unseen growth in university disciplines in the humanities. The study of religion has expanded no less greatly, because the discipline is needed for teacher education in the Swedish system. Twenty years ago only a handful of universities and university colleges in Sweden provided education in this field. Today education and research are available in more than twenty different places. Of course, it is *religionsvetenskap* rather than the traditional history of religions that has expanded, but the development has still meant a huge growth in job opportunities and research environments for scholars who take a traditional history of religions approach as well. There are no inherent rules that prevent a focus on classical philology or a traditional humanities-based history of religions approach in these places. The efficiency focus already mentioned makes time-consuming language education difficult, but, within the given time frames, there are

no externally imposed limitations governing the content of education and research.

So what is the problem if the field has expanded and it remains possible for scholars to choose the topic they want? Is there a problem at all? Or is the talk about such problems perhaps part of our self-identity as humanities scholars? It could be argued that the legitimacy of the humanities lies in its ability to challenge that which is taken for granted in society and to consider and formulate provocative and uncomfortable ideas. If this is the idea of our work that we seek to uphold, then it is not especially surprising that we would also benefit from seeing ourselves as being questioned and opposed by the system. Could such a dynamic explain why the notion of crisis endures, despite evidence to the contrary in university budgets? Is the supposed crisis in our field a matter of prestige?

There is no doubt that a side effect of expansion and growth is a loss of exclusiveness. As has been pointed out by the Swedish historian of ideas, Sven-Eric Liedman, scholars of the humanities used to have an obvious place in Swedish public life. In the 1950s professors in the humanities constituted a small and well-paid elite with direct access to the then still prestigious high schools, as well as to the culture pages of the big newspapers (Liedman 2010, 51). Today the community of scholars is considerably larger but less secure. Needless to say, there is a class aspect to this development. As long as humanities scholars were part of an exclusive upper class elite, they could go about their business more or less undisturbed. Today, with a majority of young people continuing to higher education and with such a greatly expanded university sector, the academic world is less of a secluded area for the elite and thus, naturally, carries less prestige.

### **Why a humanities approach to the study of religion?**

I have argued that humanities scholars have been compelled to adjust and motivate their research so that it conjoins with the logic of a result-oriented society. I have argued that the major challenge to the traditional history of religions, and the main cause of its transformation as a more contemporarily focused and sociologically inclined *Religionsvetenskap*, lie in this changed research ideal and the altered knowledge contract between the universities and society that it has brought about. Let me conclude this discussion by briefly mentioning one way to argue for the necessity of a humanities approach in the study of religion that conjoins with the new societal logic.

It has been argued that it is superfluous and counterproductive to uphold the distinction between the humanities and the social sciences (Ekström & Sörlin 2012). The development in the study of religions, as well as in many other disciplines, points to the sense of such an argument. Why maintain outdated divisions when scholars on both sides work with similar questions, methods, and materials in administratively combined research settings? This is a relevant question, but there may also be a risk that perspectives and approaches that have been unique to the traditional humanities disciplines will be lost if two faculties are merged.

In the above discussion above I have emphasised that a focus on language and text has been an important element in what made the traditional history of religions a humanities discipline. A knowledge of text and language are of pivotal importance if we want to understand religion. Indeed, without such knowledge, we lack the most basic tools needed even to begin to talk about religion in history. There are, however, other aspects that might be emphasised in speaking of the humanities approach to the history of religions. One such aspect is the hermeneutical method and epistemology. The humanities, it has been argued, are a climate of thinking (Bridon 2011). As in other scholarly endeavours, researchers within the humanities seek knowledge about the world in which they find themselves. What makes humanities scholars different, then, is the means by which this is done. Where natural scientists explore reality with the laboratory as their most prominent tool, social scientists construct and test models as their main method. For scholars of the humanities, then – from philosophers in the tradition of Gadamer, through ethnographers working in the footsteps of Malinowski (Gadamer 1960; Malinowski 1967) – the foremost means of knowledge production is through language and interpretation. For them the exploration of reality is not detached from, but intimately connected with, the experience of the researcher's subject. Hermeneutically inclined humanities scholars, unlike those of other faculties, do not seek to distance themselves from the world they seek to understand. Instead they acknowledge their own embeddedness in it and make use of the unique source of knowledge that lies in the fact that they themselves, much like the people and artefacts they study, are creatures of language and culture. One could argue that it is in their methodological acknowledgement of this that the humanities differ from other research traditions.

Now, this does not (necessarily) mean that research within the humanities seeks to fulfil a goal that is fundamentally different from that of the natural and social sciences. All academic endeavour is governed by the desire to produce knowledge about reality, however hopeless such an ambition may

seem. In this respect, I believe, there is no major difference between the scholars of different faculties. The differences in method do not necessarily reflect differences in our view of science, knowledge, and reality. Rather, the methodological and epistemological differences between laboratory work and hermeneutical interpretation can be informed by the differences between the questions to which answers are sought.

To answer certain questions a hermeneutical humanities approach is simply necessary, not because it affords a softer and less accurate complement to the hard facts produced by the social and natural sciences, but because it can provide the most relevant and precise answers to a certain type of question. Ponder, for example, the case of religious radicalisation among young European men. It is obvious that it is urgent for society and scholars alike to understand the processes that cause this phenomenon. Knowledge grounded in the humanities is what most would agree is needed for an appropriate response to this. We need to know why people are radicalised, what it means to them, what it is they find appealing in the radical messages to which they turn; we need to understand the role that their different relationships play; we need to know how their individual life stories interact with the ideologies they encounter; how culture, personal preferences, theological systems, sex, class, and ethnicity play in and interact with the complex processes that cause them to change. It is obvious that both the natural and the social sciences can provide important knowledge here, but if we are to have the realistic understanding required to make decisions concerning the kind of societal measures called for by the situation, we need the kind of interpretative and qualitative picture that only the humanities can provide.

The Swedish discipline of the history of religions has transformed itself. On the one hand it has, in the form of *religionsvetenskap*, grown considerably and expanded into empirical fields, methods, and theories which were alien to it only twenty-five years ago. On the other it has been forced – by societal currents and administrative legislation – to adjust to a political climate focused on direct social relevance, measurability, and quantifiable efficiency. In the process it has lost some of the features that constituted its identity as a scholarly tradition. It is now up to us – the active scholars in the field – to bring the discipline forwards in a society where its relevance seems to grow day by day, and navigate between the trap of being made redundant in an age blinded by its focus on the contemporary, or the trap of losing our integrity by retreating from our confidence in the importance of in-depth engagement with our sources.

\* \* \*

DAVID THURFJELL is Professor in the Study of Religions at the School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University. E-mail: david.thurfjell@sh.se

### References

#### **Benner, Mats**

2001 *Kontrovers och konsensus: vetenskap och politik i svenskt 1990-tal*. Stockholm: Institutet för studier av utbildning och forskning (SISTER).

#### **Bridon, Diana**

2011 Do the humanities need a new humanism? – Daniel Coleman & Smaro Kamboureli (eds) *Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities*, 233–61. University of Alberta Press.

#### **Ekström, Anders & Sörlin, Sverker**

2012 *Alltings mått: humanistisk kunskap i framtidens samhälle*. Stockholm: Norstedt.

#### **Ellström, Sarah**

2010 *Anställningsbarhet i teori och praktik*. Lunds universitet, Statsvetenskapliga institutionen.

#### **Gadamer, Hans-Georg**

1960 *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr.

#### **Harpham, Geoffrey Galt**

2011 *The humanities and the dream of America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

#### **Holm, Poul & Dominic Scott & Arne Jarrick**

2015 *Humanities world report 2015*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

#### **Liedman, Sven-Eric**

2010 Vaults behind vaults endlessly: Some thoughts on the humanities yesterday, today and tomorrow – Carl Cederberg & Hans Ruin (eds) *Another humanities – another time*, 47–52. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola.

#### **Malinowski, Bronislaw**

1967 *A diary in the strict sense of the term*. London: Routledge.

#### **Reinalter, Helmut**

2011 *Krise der Geisteswissenschaften? Ihre Bedeutung und gesellschaftliche Relevanz heute*. Weimar: European Academy of Sciences and Arts.



**Rem, Tore & Helge Jordheim (eds)**

2014 *Hva skal vi med humaniora?.* Oslo: Fritt ord.

**Roos, Lena**

forthcoming *Att undervisa om världsreligionerna.* Religionshistoriska rapporter från Uppsala.

**Ekström, Anders & Sverker Sörlin**

2012 *Alltings mått: humanistisk kunskap i framtidens samhälle.* Stockholm: Norstedt.

## VA-rapport 2015

*Vetenskapen i samhället: resultat från SOM-undersökningen 2014.* VA-rapport 2015 (2). Vetenskap & allmänhet. < [http://v-a.se/downloads/varapport2015\\_2.pdf](http://v-a.se/downloads/varapport2015_2.pdf)>, accessed 10 December 2015.

**Widengren, Geo**

1936 *The Accadian and Hebrew psalms of lamentation as religious documents: a comparative study.* Avhandling. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.



# Religious education and teaching young people about humanity: Suggesting a new role for RE and for the academic study of religions in Sweden

JONAS SVENSSON

*Linnæus University*

## Abstract

This article is a suggestion for the rethinking of the role and purpose of religious education (RE) in Swedish public schools, in relation to two major recent reforms: of teachers training (2012) and of syllabi for RE (2011). Based on a notion of the 'humanistic' study of religions as the study of religion as a human cultural product, the article argues that a RE – mainly in lower and upper secondary school – informed by contemporary theoretical development, better than any other school subject can cater for the important task of educating young people about who they, as human beings, are and why. To substantiate this claim, the content of the above mentioned reforms are presented, and placed in historical context. Furthermore, the article provides a set of examples of how actual teaching may be structured to fulfil its proposed new task, with a basis in the current syllabi for lower and upper secondary school.

Keywords: *humanistic study of religions, religious education, Sweden, syllabi, educational reforms, didactics of religion*

In 2011 the Swedish system of primary and secondary education underwent a dramatic change. New syllabi were written for every school subject. These outlined in detail areas that should be covered from the first year of primary school to the final year of upper secondary school. In 2012 a similarly dramatic change was initiated in teacher training.

In this article I argue that the combination of these two changes provides a golden opportunity to strengthen the academic, secular, and humanistic study of religions at Swedish universities, but that it also requires reflection. The reforms provide an economic and institutional infrastructure that may benefit both research and education. However, the full utilisation of this new infrastructure will require some rethinking concerning how and why we study religion in the first place, and also how we conceive of the particular 'humanistic' character of our study.

The humanistic study of religions concerns (among other things) historical and contemporary beliefs, practices, and social organisations that are

connected with human notions of superhuman agents.<sup>1</sup> The key word here is human. The study ultimately concerns human beings: their actions, their beliefs, and their ways of social organisation; not gods, demons, angels, or devils. The understanding of the term 'humanistic' in this article is for the most part posed against 'theological' studies of religion, where superhuman agents themselves (gods, demons, angels etc.), their (assumed) beliefs, intentions, and actions are the ultimate objects of study.

The article is based on an expansion of the concept 'humanistic' beyond descriptive inventories of the human phenomenon of religion throughout history, systematisation, and labelling of its various expressions (myth, ritual, prayer etc.) and the critical discussions about the aptness of the conceptual apparatuses employed. I believe that the humanistic, as opposed to theological, study of religion has great potential to contribute to an ongoing and genuinely multidisciplinary study of the strange and fascinating species we call *Homo sapiens*, its coming into existence, and its characteristics. In this, I further claim, lies a new way of conceiving, and as a consequence justifying, the place of religious studies as a compulsory subject in the Swedish school system.

Integrating the humanistic study of religion into this wider academic context means, first, treating religion as essentially human and the rejection (at least in principle) of the notion that phenomena under the umbrella concept of 'religion' are, *sui generis*, unique, irreducible, and beyond explanation. Second, and perhaps more controversially, it means problematizing a key methodological concept that is often taken for granted in the humanities at large: that cultural phenomena can be explained by reference to entities such as beliefs, needs, feelings, intentions, and strategies of actors that are in themselves irreducible. The presence of such entities is inferred from a Cartesian, dualistically informed, introspection (I have mental and emotional states that I term beliefs, needs, feelings, intentions etc. that explain my actions) combined with observations of the behaviour of others, behaviour that it is assumed is caused by the same type of entities (which makes the reasoning circular). Current research into how the human mind works has shown that introspection concerning the relationship between emotions, mental states, and actions is often quite fallible, and that the mental and emotional states that we term beliefs, strategies, intentions, and feelings are far from *sui generis*, but rather easily manipulated in quite predictable ways (see e.g. Lewis 2013). A convergence of different disciplines, e.g. linguistics,

---

1 Note that this is not a definition of 'religion'. It is my delimitation of the object of study within the humanistic study of religions.

computer science, developmental psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, evolutionary biology, and comparative ethology, is slowly, but steadily, moving towards an increasingly comprehensive understanding of what makes humans, as a distinct species, special, and what makes human culture, including religion, possible and likely. My claim is that what we are witnessing in this process is the beginning of a large-scale epistemological exorcism of the humanities that is driving out the cherished *Geist* from *Geisteswissenschaft* and moving towards a *Wissenschaft*, in which the distinction between the humanities and the other sciences is becoming increasingly blurred (see e.g. Slingerland 2008; Wilson 1998). This development does not render the humanities and the humanistic study of religion redundant. On the contrary, mapping human culture throughout history, systematising it, probing into its details, making comparisons, pointing to continuity, disruption, and change and to correlations between cultural expressions, social structures, and physical environments is a necessary, indeed indispensable, element of the overall collaborative project.<sup>2</sup> It is also precisely in this capacity that the humanistic (in the basic sense stated above) study of religion becomes important in relation to religious education in Sweden. RE has the potential to become *the* school subject that more than any other secures the important task of teaching children about who they are and why.

To strengthen my argument the article will first provide a short outline of the content of the two reforms mentioned above, and briefly contrast the current situation to situations before these reforms. This can be seen as a contextualisation that may afford an explanation of the somewhat peculiar place that RE has in the Swedish school system. Second, I will turn to the basic claim of the article: that a minor rethinking of the humanistic study of religion in academia and a consequent reform of teacher training at university level will provide a new and fruitful role for RE within the school curriculum. I will refer to a short set of cases as examples. These serve merely as snapshots. As my own scholarly expertise is in the field of Islam, that religion will serve as the basic starting point, highlighting the particular, and currently hotly discussed, case of ISIL, the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant.

The historical contextualisation of RE and the claim that there is a need to reform the academic humanistic study of religion in Sweden in light of new research can be seen as both properly academically descriptive and critically analytical tasks. However, advocating change in the purpose and

---

<sup>2</sup> For a book-length argument in line with this, but specifically relating to anthropology, see Bloch 2012.

objectives of RE in Swedish schools is a basically normative endeavour, concerning less how things are and more how they should be. This is an approach to the subject with which I am neither familiar nor comfortable. Such a normative perspective, however, is less problematic if considered in the context of the subfield of the (Swedish) study of religions in which this article could be categorised, that of the didactics of religion. The didactics of religion concern themselves with the questions of 'what', 'how', and 'why' in relation to RE as taught in schools. These questions may have a descriptive and analytical focus: what is being taught, how is it being taught, and why are these choices and not others made?<sup>3</sup> However, there are also quite a number of examples of academic work that frame these questions in a normative way: what should be taught, how should it be taught, and why should these choices (and not others) be made?<sup>4</sup> The basic argument of this article, as stated above, is rooted in the 'why' question and has a clear 'should' aspect, which is related to an ambition to contribute to the strengthening of the position of the humanistic study of religions in Swedish academia. Answers to both the 'what' and 'how' questions follow from this.

## The reforms

### *New teacher training*

The 2012 reforms in teacher training at Swedish universities had two overarching objectives: to increase subject knowledge among prospective teachers; and to increase teaching competence in order to transform that knowledge into a teaching practice that in turn may increase the pupils' knowledge. The important shift here was from an approach focusing on general teacher-student relations and pedagogy to one focusing on the knowledge and knowledge transmission specific to the subject.

In reference to changes in Swedish society and to international events the government bill concerning the future of teacher training presented to parliament on 4th January 2010 points to a need for both width and depth in teachers' knowledge (Sveriges regering, 8). Teachers should have profound insight into the subjects they teach (Sveriges regering, 9). This is particularly important for teachers at lower and upper secondary schools

---

3 For an excellent example of this, see Berglund 2010.

4 I contend that the bulk of what is published within the field has this normative character: see e.g. Olivestam 2006; Falkevall (ed.) 2013; Löfstedt (ed.) 2011.

(pupils aged 13–18), for which a more subject-focused education for future teachers (compared with the lower levels of primary school [pupils aged 6–12]) is required (Sveriges regering, 24). Furthermore, the bill stresses the importance of a close relationship between upper secondary schools and universities, both to facilitate the transition between school and university and to make teachers experts in their fields (Sveriges regering, 26).

One of the main changes introduced for future lower and upper secondary teachers was therefore to increase the time dedicated to individual subjects at the expense of general pedagogy, previously termed the 'field of general education' (*Allmänt utbildningsområde*, AUO). This was replaced by a more academic cluster of centrally defined courses termed the 'core of educational science' (*Utbildningsvetenskaplig kärna*, UVK), and was reduced by a third (from eighteen months to a year), while the time devoted to subject study was increased (Sveriges regering, 35–7).

Prospective upper secondary teachers (the first of whom will graduate in the spring of 2016) will on completion have attained master's level in their primary teaching subject and bachelor's level in their secondary subject. The bill also stresses that at least half the teaching practice should be subject-specific and take place under the formal auspices of individual subjects (Sveriges regering, 25). The reforms thus contain a clear strengthening of the academic element of teacher training.

However, the Ministry of Education had more thorough plans for reform. As the new teacher training programme was launched, all higher education institutions, without exception, had to reapply for a licence to issue teaching degrees. Every institution had to compile a thorough inventory of actual competences, as well as descriptions of how the new training was to be organised. A selection process followed, which was clearly not for show. In the field of RE several Swedish institutions with university status did not receive the licences for which they had applied, and among them was one of the most prestigious. They could not demonstrate conclusively that their training met the new standards. On the other hand, several of the smaller university colleges, often with differently structured training, passed the test. It is possible – at least in some cases where numbers of both teachers and students were very small – that this was closely connected to the fact that these smaller institutions, although short of resources, offered training whose structure was in tune with the other aspect of RE in Sweden that needs to be considered: the new syllabi of 2011.

*New syllabi in a historical perspective*

The reforms of teacher training introduced by the government in 2012 did not in themselves specify the content of courses, either in the study of religions at university level or in any other subject relevant to teacher training. However, it is possible that when universities were evaluated at least some consideration was given to how training matched the actual demands of the school subject (which was in line with the intentions expressed in the 2010 bill). To substantiate this latter claim a closer look at these syllabi and a very brief historical contextualisation are merited.<sup>5</sup>

It may appear strange that religious education should be a compulsory subject at all levels in Swedish schools, given that Sweden is sometimes described as one of the world's most secularised countries, has the highest percentage of professed atheists, and the lowest who state that religion is an important part of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Part of the explanation is historical. RE grew out of an earlier confessional education with a history dating to the introduction of the compulsory school system in 1842, and the central role played by the state religion of Evangelical Lutheranism in education and in nurturing obedient subjects of the Swedish crown. However, this historical foundation is insufficient as an explanation. Religious teaching has changed enormously since 1842, and its evolution has clearly been connected with social change. The place of RE in the curriculum has been challenged many times, especially in the last fifty years, but, although it has been pushed further and further from the core, it has persisted. It is my contention that one of the underlying reasons is that the subject's proponents, in their changing ideas about its role and purpose, have been successful in continuously adapting the subject to the prevailing *Zeitgeist*.

When the dominance of the state church was challenged by the emergence of other Christian denominations at the beginning of the twentieth century, the subject ceased to focus on the rote learning of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* and biblical history, and adopted a more general Christian focus stressing the teachings of Jesus. This was formalised with a name change in 1919, when the teaching of the catechism was abolished. The main objective of teaching remained the moulding of good, loyal Christians (even if no longer necessarily good Lutherans). However, with Sweden's

---

5 The following outline of the historical development is limited. For a more comprehensive presentation, see Hartman 2011 and Hartman 1994.

6 The claim that Sweden is the most secularised or atheist country in the world may be challenged on several accounts. I will not do that here though, as it would lead in the wrong direction. For a new, book-length, critical discussion, see Thurffjell 2015.



rapid economic and social modernisation in the twentieth century, even this approach to teaching was challenged, as was the authority of the church in politics in general and in education in particular. A radical and important shift came in the early 1960s (in spite of the fact that the name of the subject remained 'Christianity' until 1969, when it was changed to 'religious education' [*religionskunskap*]). There was (in theory, but perhaps not in practice) a clean break with the confessional and moulding features of religious teaching, and a new direction was taken towards both widening the scope of its content (teaching was now expected to cover not only Christianity, but also other religions and non-religious worldviews), and towards meeting demands from a public intellectual elite (often critical of religion) that teaching should be religiously neutral. Hence, religious teaching became teaching about religion. This perspective was further challenged in the late 1960s when another factor came into play: a new pedagogical tradition that was critical of teacher-centred education. This affected RE. The ideal of neutral teaching was challenged, as well as the notion that the primary role of RE was to provide facts about religion. Instead – at least in the general discourse, but also in the content of the new syllabi produced in 1969 and 1980 – there was what could be seen as a return to the subject's former moulding character. Fact-oriented RE – on the basis of some surveys of pupils' attitudes (the weight of which informed the shift in thinking about the role of education in general) – was judged to be non-engaging and uninteresting. The role of RE was now to provide pupils with tools for the construction of their own personal worldviews and identity (religious or not), based on their 'ultimate concerns'. Facts about religious traditions were now largely construed as resources for pupils' personal reflection. There was therefore another name change in 1980: the subject was now called 'Human questions of life and being. Religious education' (*Människans frågor inför livet och tillvaron. Religionskunskap*). This view of the role and function of RE as an arena for personal worldview construction has been quite influential and remains strong, especially within the academic discipline of the didactics of religion that has already been mentioned. (For examples, see Olivestam 2006, 138–148; Löfstedt 2011a; Falkevall 2013, 27–9.) This is despite the fact that the subject's name was again changed to religious education (*Religionskunskap*) in 1994.

Yet further social changes were to come that influenced RE. In the 1980s and 1990s, not least as a result of immigration, Sweden was becoming an increasingly multireligious society, and a new role for RE emerged as a subject in which tolerance and understanding of people with diverging beliefs

and practices could be developed. This notion that RE, in addressing diverse religious traditions, should provide a basis for interpersonal understanding and social tolerance – like the notion of its role as character moulding and identity building in general – is of continuing influence on the subject.<sup>7</sup>

### *The 2011 syllabi*

What then of the new syllabi? They are much more detailed in outlining both the purpose of the subject and the goals and specific content than previously, and I cannot go into all the details here. However, there are some important similarities and differences – again mirroring changes in society and the *Zeitgeist* – in relation to previous syllabi that should be highlighted, because they are of immediate relevance for this article's overall claim.

First, although they differ in structure, there are similarities in content between the new syllabi and their predecessors. However, it is the differences that are most relevant. The new syllabi are the most comprehensive to date. They move away somewhat from the notion of RE's instrumental role in pupils' development of their own worldviews that has been so dominant in the last four decades, and in that sense constitute something of a return to a more facts-oriented approach. Religious traditions and non-religious worldviews are firmly established as objects of study in themselves. This is especially seen in the place given to the concept of 'life questions' (*livsfrågor*) that was central to the pupil-oriented pedagogy of the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> In the latter pupils' own life questions formed the starting point in determining which religious traditions and non-religious alternatives should be taught. In the 2011 lower secondary syllabus the life questions still constitute part of what needs to be covered, but are no longer central. More importantly, they are seen as general human life questions to be treated as historically relevant, i.e. they are not limited to whatever existential questions pupils happen to have as they are being taught (*Skolverket* 2011b).

Another important change is that the new syllabi have a strong focus on religion as a human and cultural phenomenon. This is a departure from a limited theological and dogmatic focus on different religious traditions, and a move towards the study of everyday beliefs, narratives, practices,

---

7 For a discussion on teaching practice related to this goal, see Liljefors-Persson 2011. Historian of religion Bodil Liljefors-Persson bases her article on the pedagogic model "Abrahams barn" (Children of Abraham) with a narrative of Abraham as the common religious ancestor of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For a critique of this model, see Löfstedt 2014.

8 For a recent overview of the concept, see Löfstedt 2011a.

and experiences, from the level of experts to 'ordinary people'. This is an indication of the cultural turn within the academic study of religion (see e.g. Slone 2004, 26–8) Although the syllabi still focus on dogma, there is now an explicit stress on diversity, change, and conflict within religious traditions.

The comparative perspective is also stressed. In the primary and lower secondary syllabi the focus is on a comparison between the specific religious traditions which must be covered (not excluding the possibility of also covering others), as well as on the themes of the comparisons that should be made, e.g. festivals, rituals, narratives, symbols, artefacts, and historical development. In early drafts of the syllabi Christianity was placed alongside other traditions. Through the personal intervention of the then Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, however, Christianity was given a special place in the text, but with no substantive consequence. For example, Björklund changed the text specifying 'Rituals, religiously motivated rules of living, holy places and spaces in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism' to 'Rituals, religiously motivated rules of living, holy places and spaces in Christianity and in the other world religions: Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism'. The change was symbolic and political, and was probably a response to protests from representatives of the small Christian Democratic Party in the ruling coalition that Christianity was not being given a privileged place in the syllabi.<sup>9</sup>

In general one could say that the 2011 syllabi are increasingly focused on human beings, their beliefs, practices, and ways of social organisation in a manner that is *more general* and *less individualistic*, *more historical*, *less ideological*, *more cultural*, and definitely *more comparative* than previous syllabi. The scope is less national and more global, and there is an explicit ambition, at least at upper secondary level, not only to describe but also to understand and explain both diversity and commonality in different forms of human expression. This forms the starting point for the following, more normative, part of this article.

### **RE and the humanities**

Throughout the twentieth century, since the abolition of confessional Lutheran education, there has been a recurring challenge to justify RE's retention as a compulsory school subject. The challenge remains today. The present article, and its basic claim, should be seen in this light. To repeat,

---

<sup>9</sup> For a short overview of the politically charged process of constructing the syllabus for primary and lower secondary school in 2010, see Svensson 2011.

the claim is that no other compulsory school subject offers a similar opportunity to probe into what it has meant and means to be human. RE has the potential to become the setting in which pupils are allowed to explore the basic shared human capacities and proclivities for culture, for morality, for imagination, for creativity, for cooperation, and for conflict. While there are other school subjects that might cater for some of these aspects, none has a similarly comprehensive scope. This is clearly acknowledged in the 2011 primary and lower secondary syllabus, where one of the purposes of the subject is spelled out as to ‘provide resources for them [the pupils] to be able to interpret cultural expressions connected to religious traditions’ (Skolverket 2011a). Here, a narrow concept of ‘culture’, involving art, literature, music, drama, etc., is intended. (I know, because I was involved in its formulation.) If we exclude the last century or so from consideration, the majority of such cultural expressions are religious in one way or the other.

The remainder of this article provides some examples of how this perceived potential for RE can be effected in teaching, by highlighting explicit topics in the syllabi and in connection with them indicate how contemporary research on human beings as a cultural and religious species can provide ample opportunities for a fruitful comparative approach to religion, between religious cultures, and between religious culture and other elements of human culture. An important aspect to remember is that the syllabi, and especially the upper secondary syllabus, place great emphasis on training the pupils’ ability to *analyse* religious phenomena. To reach the higher grades pupils must be able to perform quite advanced analysis, within a comparative framework, and reach conclusions of a general character.<sup>10</sup> This, I claim, cannot be done without theory.

### **Possible focus areas – examples**

#### *Human imagination and the construction of alternative worlds*

The syllabi are progressive in the sense that they presuppose that areas covered at earlier stages will provide the foundation for later elaboration. Religious narratives such as myths and legends are therefore covered before lower and upper secondary school. However, the task of critically analysing

---

<sup>10</sup> Note here particularly the parts of the syllabi that outline criteria for different grades (*kunskapskrav*). For achieving the higher grades, comparison, analysis, and generalising conclusions are necessary.

these narratives and their role in society can be said to rest largely in these latter stages. What then might a humanistic contribution, as defined above, entail for such an analysis? Let me offer an example.

The proponents of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant have been quite clear concerning their political ambitions. The movement has repeatedly published (with modifications) their vision of a future world in the form of a map that outlines the boundaries and the structure of an imagined territory under a unitary Islamic jurisdiction, the Caliphate. At first glance, and even in the rhetoric, this is connected with historical precedent. A closer examination, however, reveals that this cannot be the case. The (imagined) Caliphate under ISIL is a selective compilation of several distinct and historical empires with different boundaries. It is a blending of historical facts, an imagining of an ideal rule of harmony under a strong leader (which and who probably never existed in practice), and a projection of that construction into the future. This is, of course, nothing new in the history of religions. In this respect there is an abundance of imaginary worlds: worlds that were (golden ages), worlds that will be (paradises, utopias), parallel worlds different from the ones in which they themselves live (the realm of the gods, spirits, ancestors etc.).

It can certainly be fascinating to describe imaginary worlds or diverse religious traditions, to compare, systematise, categorise, and label them. But other questions may be posed, which I claim are relevant in another sense, even for those not particularly interested in the content of these worlds as such. There is no indication that any other animal besides humans creates them, even in their most rudimentary form. Indeed, the very basic capacity behind these worlds, to mentally represent something that is not present in the here and now, appears rare. Cognitive scientist Peter Gärdenfors speaks of a unique human capacity and proclivity for anticipatory thinking, i.e. planning ahead (Gärdenfors 2008, 85–8), for forming mental simulations of future situations. This capacity has proved a great evolutionary advantage, one of several examples of our species having exploited what psychologist Steven Pinker terms the ‘cognitive niche’ (Pinker 2010). It is a capacity that humans employ routinely in their everyday lives. It is so ‘natural’ that we do not even consider it special. And here is the point relating to RE: by highlighting striking examples, like the Caliphate as imagined by ISIL, a way is opened to a more general investigation into the workings of the human imagination in daily life, which is essentially no different. This is an area that, to paraphrase cognitive linguists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, is increasingly moving from being celebratory of mystery (of imagination) to

becoming an intriguing scientific investigation (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). New theories concerning how the human creative imagination works, the rules that govern it, and why it works in this way are being developed and tested (see e.g. Turner 2014). One of the general roles of education is to disseminate advances in human, and more specifically scientific, knowledge. Few, if any, of the subjects in the Swedish curriculum apart from RE can offer a similarly wide-ranging opportunity to do this when it comes to the human imaginative faculties.

Other questions also arise. Although every neurotypical human individual is capable of creating imaginary worlds in her head, very few of these worlds become objects of cultural elaboration, and, as in the case of the ISIL future Caliphate, become established as politically powerful images that attract and inspire action. We can observe and describe emergence, spread, and impact, but how do we explain it? One way is to follow the anthropologist Dan Sperber's lead in his theoretical concept of an 'epidemiology of cultural representations' specifying environmental 'macro-factors' and mind internal 'micro-factors' that influence the process (Sperber 1996, 77–97). The latter's role is especially relevant for a humanistic study, and here comparison is pivotal. The ISIL Caliphate is not the first, nor will it be the last, imaginary world. The history of religions affords evidence of this. In the Swedish classroom, in the context of RE, the evidence can be assessed and discussions can follow concerning what makes certain imaginary historical and contemporary worlds attractive, about human commonalities and differences, and how these can affect cultural distribution. A set of preliminary answers has already been hypothesised and empirically tested: e.g. potentiality for evocation of emotions (Whitehouse 2004), relevance (Boyer 2001), counter-intuitivity (Barrett & Nyhof 2001), and various other biases in human thought and social learning (Richerson & Boyd 2005). More will surely emerge in time.

### *Mentalising*

Although there has been a shift in the 2011 syllabus away from religion as merely a matter of beliefs, and particularly beliefs in gods, and a new focus on other aspects, especially religious behaviour, there is still a place for what can be termed the ideological aspect of religion and dogma. However, even 'belief in gods' can be further explored in the search for a more basic understanding of ourselves as humans. Such beliefs are cultural constructs that reveal another basic, and in its complexity unique, human capacity

that is, like the capacity for imagination, otherwise hidden because of the 'naturalness' with which we employ it in our everyday lives. However, it has been the focus of much research since it was 'discovered' in the late 1970s (Premack & Woodruff 1978).

The glossy English language Magazine *Dabiq* is a channel for ISIL propaganda containing reports of the movement's advance, apocalyptic visions of the future, and articles about the joy of living under Islamic rule in Syria and Iraq. One example of the latter is an interview in issue 7 with Umm Basir, also known as Hayat Boumedienne, suspected accomplice of Amedy Coulibali who was shot dead after attacking a kosher shop in Paris in the spring of 2015, in connection with the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo. She tells of her joy at being in ISIL-controlled territory: 'All praise is due to Allah who facilitated the way for me [to come to Syria...] Living in a land where the law of Allah ('azza wa jall) is implemented is something great. I feel at ease now that I have carried out this obligation. All praise is due to Allah. I ask Allah to keep me firm.' (Anonymous 2015, 50) Few people will have any problem understanding the basic meaning of this utterance (although they may resent it). I suggest, however, that even fewer realise that this very understanding rests on a complex mental operation, so complex and costly that few species in the animal kingdom have developed the capacity for it, and none in the elaborate manner found in *Homo sapiens*. The capacity is for creating advanced mental images of the 'inner worlds' (Gärdenfors 2008, 83–5) of other persons (and even animals, objects, and abstract entities), and using such mental constructs as heuristic 'explanations' for observed events in the surroundings.

'Mentalising' among humans is unique in two respects: first, it can be done at several levels (imagining that other human beings imagine the imagination of yet others, as Umm Basir is imagining the imagination of God). Second, we can imagine the inner worlds of persons (or entities) who are not physically present in the here and now, even of those we have never actually experienced. These two aspects of mentalising, in combination, constitute the backbone of the human 'Machiavellian intelligence' (de Waal & Morris 1982), a prerequisite for large-scale human social interaction, including such activities as social planning and deception.<sup>11</sup>

RE is a potential goldmine for exploring this human capacity precisely because the history of religions abounds with cultural examples of it. Indeed, the capacity is a basic prerequisite for such frequently recurring phenomena

---

11 For a discussion of the evolutionary background, see Gamble *et al.* 2014.

as beliefs in invisible gods, ghosts, and ancestors as social actors.<sup>12</sup> But there are other avenues to tread that relate to pupils' more immediate lifeworlds. Although Sweden is a society that has seen a marked decline in people's active participation in religious activities and engagement in religious collectives, beliefs in non-human actors engaged in world events seem to linger. It is even more noticeable that less personalised entities that affect the individual's life seem still to be very much part of the common imagination (see e.g. Thurfjell 2015). Similarly, while specific notions of heaven and hell may become less relevant, there are still many who ask, 'What happens after we die?' It is possible to explain both these phenomena if the mentalising capacity is taken into account.

As has already been observed, the previous and current RE syllabi have given space for students to reflect on existential life questions. However, no answers are given. The perspective offered in this article also provides no answers, but it suggests a possible answer to why humans pose, and throughout history have posed, life questions in the first place. It is part of who we are. The perhaps most basic question 'What is the meaning of life?' is, as the psychologist Jesse Bering suggests, a by-product of a combination of anticipatory thinking and mentalising – both of which are capacities that have been adaptive in evolutionary terms. The combination results in the recurring notion that things happen (or will happen) for a *reason*. Human beings have a natural proclivity for this kind of 'teleo-functional reasoning', and the history of religions provides ample evidence for this (Bering 2013, 39–76).

Even more specific life questions may be explored in this way in the classroom. Recent research on the proclivity in human thinking for mind-body dualism, in connection with the way in which a person's notions of her inner world is mentally processed differently than perceptions of her material body,<sup>13</sup> can, for example, provide fertile ground for a comparative analysis of one of the themes the syllabus explicitly mentions, the life question concerning what happens after death, and why this has been such a recurring theme in history.

---

12 For a fairly recent, general, and accessible introduction to the role of mentalising in the field of religion, and particularly beliefs in superhuman agents, see Bering 2013. For other introductions, see e.g. Tremlin 2006; McCauley 2011.

13 For a recent review article of research on intuitive dualism that claims it is a pan-human proclivity, see Chudek *et al.* 2013. For similar claims, see Bloom 2007.



*Cooperation and conflict*

The lower secondary syllabus clearly states that the social roles (plural) of religion should be part of what is taught: 'The teaching shall in a neutral manner shed light upon the role religions can play in society, both in the quest for peace and in conflict, to serve as a tool for social cohesion and as a cause of segregation' (Skolverket 2011a). A similar content is specified for upper secondary school (Skolverket 2011b). Such features of the syllabi can be construed as a direct result of world events in recent decades, and an increased understanding that organised religion, though marginal in Swedish society, is an important factor in understanding and explaining contemporary politics in other parts of the world.

This potential for religion to play an important part in political thinking and action is perhaps most evident, even as I write, in the example of ISIL, which will inevitably need to be addressed in the classroom. Here, I can only hint at a particular theme that may be useful as a starting point and that may lead to a more in-depth probing into more general basic human peculiarities. It is clear that ISIL to a large extent exploits the all too human proclivity for social categorisation and erection of boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. 'Us' are the true Muslims, heeding the will of God as literally expressed in the Qur'an and the Sunna. 'Them' is practically everyone else: Western 'crusaders', Shiite 'apostates', Yazidi 'Satanists', and Peshmerga 'Zionists'. ISIL propaganda is a prime example of how social categories are created and imbued with negative emotive value through association with names and epithets borrowed from an Islamic historical and theological 'pool of resources' (Eickelman & Piscatory 2004). Internal group identity is marked by the use of objects or other emblems: the style of beard, badges, songs, slogans, particular behaviours, etc. All of this is known in the history of religions. There is nothing new here, and this can easily be highlighted in teaching. We know, from experimental research as well as from natural observation, how important and powerful visible emblems in themselves can be in triggering processes of internal solidarity and external hostility. As an educational resource the example of ISIL and the comparative history of religions can be transposed to students' immediate lifeworld, and thus encourage reflection on common human social-psychological processes.

Human beings are ultra-social, with a unique capacity to form large-scale cooperative units that has been one of the most important factors in the evolutionary history of the species. This feature is shared only with certain insects and naked mole-rats. In the cases of these other animals, however, large-scale cooperation is only done with close relatives. Humans, on the

other hand, can also have large-scale cooperation with those not related to themselves, provided they are mentally represented as belonging to the same group (narrowly or widely defined).<sup>14</sup> The way in which diverse phenotypical traits or cultural markers (language, dress, behaviour) are utilised in this process is a basic, but also important, issue to address in teaching as part of a more general moulding of responsible future citizens. It is part of educating critical thinkers. As scanning for potential collaborators and foes is an ongoing, and mostly unconscious, process among humans, the danger of exploitation is immediate.

The Swedish school system has, as an explicitly formulated task, the promotion of the values of social tolerance and solidarity across such otherwise easily exploitable markers as ethnicity, language, and religion. A focus on informing pupils of these cherished values, telling them that they are not allowed to define 'the other' based on these markers, is probably not enough. The very human proclivity to do this, and the abundance of examples of how this human proclivity can be, and has been, exploited at times with horrible results must be addressed if it is to be challenged. RE, with its wealth of empirical cases, provides an excellent starting point, and material more related to pupils' immediate lifeworld can be used as complementary exemplification of the same processes: group formation on the basis of gender, clothing styles, linguistic markers, etc.

### *Morality and ethics*

Especially since the 1980s it has been stressed that RE should cater to pupils' need for ethical reflection. However, the subject has been, and still is, highly influenced by a traditional view of morality as a consequence of ethical reflection.<sup>15</sup> This is also evident in the current syllabi. Teaching at lower secondary school should cover: 'Everyday ethical dilemmas. Analysis and argumentation based on ethical models, for example consequence ethics and duty ethics' and 'Conceptions of what constitutes a good life and the good human being connected to ethical reasoning, for example in relation to virtues' (Skolverket 2011a). In the upper secondary syllabus, there is a similar stress on theoretical models and concepts in ethical analysis (Skolverket 2011b). More specifically connected with religion, the lower secondary syllabus mentions 'ethical issues and anthropology [*människosyn*]' in some

---

<sup>14</sup> Research in this area is vast. I recent book by psychologist Joshua Greene provides a good, accessible overview (Greene 2013).

<sup>15</sup> For a recent example of this in the didactics of religion, see Löfstedt 2011b.

religions and worldviews [*livsåskådningar*]. The corresponding wording in the upper secondary syllabus is that pupils should 'investigate and analyse ethical issues in relation to Christianity, other religions and worldviews' (Skolverket 2011b). The underlying perspective and view of ethics and morality is clear. The focus on (rational) ethical reasoning as the basis for morality ignores the fact that evidence has been mounting since the 1980s that the relationship between morality and ethics probably happens the other way round. (See e.g. Haidt 2001; Haidt 2012.) Although, of course, human beings engage in ethical reflection, such reflection is more often than not a secondary rationalisation of what, for lack of a better term, may be called a 'gut-feeling'. The importance of this recognition can be illustrated with another example related to ISIL.

Especially since 2015 there has been an increasing public uneasiness in Sweden and other European countries concerning the fact that a number of young Muslims have travelled to Syria to join the ranks of ISIL. 'Radicalisation', its causes and how it can be prevented, has been much to the fore. It is currently estimated that perhaps as many as three hundred young Muslims have left Sweden for Syria. Among them some young women, going not to participate in the fighting, but to marry the fighters. There has been much focus on the men who have travelled. Their engagement with ISIL has been seen as presenting a danger to national security, because they could very well return to Sweden trained for terrorist attacks. Then, of course, there are the various acts of violence they may perform *in situ*. These concerns are certainly reasonable. But what problems do the young women present?

There has been a longstanding and ongoing public debate in Sweden about the limitations on young women's freedom posed by the so-called 'culture of honour', associated for the most part with Swedes of a Muslim or Middle Eastern background. The problem is that young women of a certain background are not allowed to choose their own partners but are forced to marry someone chosen for them by their parents. They are not in control of their own private lives or sexuality. Why then does it constitute a problem when young women leave Sweden for Syria, often against the explicit wishes of their parents, in search of a relationship with a man they have themselves chosen? Should it not instead be seen as a commendable assertion of independence? What is the moral difference when a young woman chooses a spouse in Sweden, sacrificing her wellbeing and safety in the process, or when she does it in Syria? However, I hypothesise that most outsiders consider the latter young woman's act to be morally wrong, and on a par with the 'male' act of joining the actual fighting.

Discrepancies such as this could form the starting point for important classroom discussions on ethics and morality, and how these, in accordance with recent research in moral psychology, are intimately tied to intuitive 'gut feelings' that can be explained. There is, for example, an emerging academic discourse concerning what is termed the 'moral foundations theory'<sup>16</sup>. This theory suggests that underlying the diversity of moral rules and the ethical reasoning that serves to justify them is a set of pan-human rudimentary intuitive morals, limited to five oppositions of care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. A possible sixth is suggested: liberty/oppression. The different foundations are not equally strong in different social and historical contexts, and themselves sometimes come into conflict, resulting in moral dilemmas. The basic claim is that they are all emotionally based and connected with the problem of human cooperation. I shall not address the theory in detail here, but merely note that it may have some explanatory potential for the example above. It would appear that on the basis of the liberty/oppression foundation there would be nothing to object to in the young women's actions. However, I contend that what underlies the negative moral judgement is the foundation of sanctity/degradation, which is ultimately tied to the emotion of disgust. It is not the act of choosing a spouse against the will of the parents that is problematic (the authority and loyalty foundations are generally not that strong in Sweden, especially compared with the liberty foundation). It is the character of the prospective husband and the act of sex inevitably involved in marriage. The thought of someone having sex with an ISIL jihadist is disgusting, and as a consequence is considered morally wrong. The empirical work on the moral foundations theory provides ample examples of how such disgust, particularly connected to sex, is an unconscious and strong determinant in moral judgements. At the same time it is more often than not difficult to justify these judgements rationally.

One of the main advantages of using empirically based moral psychological research in discussing ethics and morality in the context of RE is that it will relieve the subject from endless classroom discussions about ethical dilemmas (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, cloning) that cannot be resolved because different positions rest on different moral foundations that are all equally 'valid' from a phenomenological point of view. Once this is realised, the

---

16 For a presentation, see Haidt 2012. This theory has received much attention in contemporary research on moral attitudes. A combined search on Google Scholar (2015-03-16) for "moral foundations theory" [within quotation marks to limit the search] and Haidt, and limited to the year 2015, produced 233 results.

study of ethics and morality can be turned in what I see as a more fruitful direction for the main objective this article proposes for the subject, i.e. learning the basics about what it is to be human. Teaching can help students explore the roots of moral rules that appear to recur over time and space: do not lie, do not cheat, do not kill (those belonging to your own group, at least), do not sleep with your brother/sister, etc., and the way in which these emotively founded rules are, at the level of reflective thought, objectivised as 'the will of God' or 'the laws of society'.

### **Conclusion**

To repeat: the four suggested focus areas above are merely examples. They might be complemented by several others similarly grounded in the explicit directives of the RE syllabi. The point has not been to specify how a humanistic approach, as defined above, to RE can be effectuated in detail, but to show that it can be.

It can easily be countered that what I propose here as a way of developing RE may just as well be done in other school subjects such as art education, music, literature, or even economics. In a way this is correct. All of these cover aspects of human culture and can all contribute to a better, empirically founded, understanding of what it means to be human, provided they are framed in the same manner as has been done with RE above. There are, however, two important circumstances that have already been mentioned. First, few human phenomena (at least from a historical perspective) encompass such a wide range of human activities as does religion, including activities within the areas mentioned – art, music, literature, and economics. Second, RE, unlike the others (except literature), is a compulsory subject at all levels in primary and secondary education. This means that choosing RE as the subject catering for this particular aspect of educating young people will ensure that all pupils receive exposure to it.

The basic suggestion for RE here is to move from a somewhat limited, but in no way unimportant, descriptive study of religious expressions in history and in the contemporary world, and to make the subject the backbone of a quest to understand human beings as a cultural species. However, if this is to be achieved teachers must be equipped with the relevant tools. This is where the academic, humanistic study of religions at university, and the teaching attached to it, comes in. Such a study needs first to be thoroughly 'humanitised', i.e. religion must be analysed and taught as an entirely human phenomenon. Second, students who aspire to become teachers of RE

must receive a broad introduction to the various aspects of different religious traditions, but at the same time must also be trained, and inspired, to dig more deeply. They must be provided with the tools to handle the typically childish question 'why', tools that are firmly grounded in what we know, or at the moment think we know, about human beings in general, i.e. theory. If this challenge is to be met, the humanistic study of religions at university level needs to expand its theoretical horizons and consider perspectives of religion developed in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and, yes, even in the natural sciences.

\* \* \*

JONAS SVENSSON is Associate Professor in the Study of Religion at the School of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University, Sweden. E-mail: jonas.svensson@lnu.se

### *Bibliography*

#### **Anonymous**

2015 An interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajirah. – *Dabiq* 7, 50–1

#### **Barrett, Justin. L. & Melanie A. Nyhof**

2001 Spreading Non-Natural Concepts. The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials. – *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1(1), 69–100.

#### **Berglund, Jenny**

2010 *Teaching Islam. Islamic Religious Education in Sweden*. Münster: Waxman

#### **Bering, Jesse**

2013 *The God Instinct. The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*. London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing.

#### **Bloch, Maurice**

2012 *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### **Bloom, Paul**

2007 Religion is natural – *Developmental Science* 10(1), 147–51.

#### **Boyer, Pascal**

2001 *Religion Explained. The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors*. London: Vintage.

#### **Chudek, Maciek & Rita McNamara & Susan Burch & Paul Bloom & Joseph Henrich**

2013 Developmental and Cross-Cultural Evidence for Intuitive Dualism. Draft article for *Psychological Science*. <<http://www2.psych>>

ubc.ca/~henrich/pdfs/ChudekEtAl\_InutiveDualism\_WorkingPaper\_June2014.pdf>, accessed 27 November 2015.

**Eickelman, Dale F. & James Piscatori**

2004 *Muslim politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

**Falkevall, Björn (ed.)**

2013 *Att undervisa i religionskunskap. En ämnesdidaktisk introduktion*. Liber: Stockholm.

**Fauconnier, Gilles & Mark Turner**

2002 *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.

**Gamble, Clive & John Gowlett & Robin I.M. Dunbar**

2014 *Thinking Big. How the Evolution of Social Life Shaped the Human Mind*. London: Thames & Hudson.

**Greene, Joshua David**

2013 *Moral Tribes. Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. New York: Penguin Press.

**Gärdenfors, Peter**

2008 The Evolution of Thought. – Peter Gärdenfors & Annika Wallin (eds.), *A Smorgasbord of Cognitive Science*, 81–98). Nora: Nya Doxa.

**Haidt, Jonathan**

2001 The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail. A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment. *Psychological Review* 108(4), pages.

2012 *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People are Divided by politics and religion*. London: Allen Lane.

**Hartman, Sven G.**

1994 Hur religionsämnet formades – Edgar Almén & Ragnar Furenhed & Sven G. Hartman (eds.), *Att undervisa om religion, livsfrågor och etik i skolan. Texter för lärarutbildning och lärarfortbildning*. Linköping: Linköpings universitet.

2011 Perspektiv på skolans religionsundervisning. – Malin Löfstedt (ed.) *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*, 19–33. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

**Lewis, David**

2013 *Impulse. Why We Do What We Do Without Knowing Why We Do It*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

**Liljefors-Persson, Bodil**

2011 Abrahams barn – inkluderande undervisning utifrån kreativt samarbete och dialog' – Malin Löfstedt (ed.) *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*, 187–200. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

**Löfstedt, Malin (ed.)**

2011 *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*. Studentlitteratur: Lund.

**Löfstedt, Malin**

2011a Livsfrågor på gott och ont'. – Malin Löfstedt (ed.) *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*, 51–64. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

2011b Etik, moral och det goda livet. – Malin Löfstedt (ed.) *Religionsdidaktik. Mångfald, livsfrågor och etik i skolan*, 113–24. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

**Löfstedt, Torsten**

2014 Abrahams barn. En kritisk reflektion kring ett begrepp – Niklas Ammert & Ulla Rosén & Jonas Svensson (eds.) *Blickar. Kulturvetenskapliga perspektiv på utbildning*, 165–78. Växjö: Linnaeus University Press.

**McCauley, Robert N.**

2011 *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Olivestam, Carl E.**

2006 *Religionsdidaktik. Om teori, perspektiv och praktik i religionsundervisningen*. Liber: Stockholm.

**Pinker, Steven**

2010 The Cognitive Niche. Coevolution of Intelligence, Sociality, and Language – *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107.

**Premack, David & Guy Woodruff**

1978 Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1(4), 515–26.

**Sveriges regering**

2010 *Bäst i klassen - en ny lärarutbildning*. Regeringens proposition 2009/10:89. Sveriges regering. <<http://www.regeringen.se/rattsdokument/proposition/2010/02/prop.-20091089/>>, accessed 12 November 2015.

**Richerson, Peter J. & Robert Boyd**

2005 *Not by Genes Alone. How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Skolverket**

2011a *Kursplan. Religionskunskap*. <<http://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/grundskoleutbildning/grundskola/religionskunskap>>, accessed 27 November 2015.

2011b *Ämne – Religionskunskap*. <<http://www.skolverket.se/laroplaner-amnen-och-kurser/gymnasieutbildning/gymnasieskola/rel?tos=gy&subjectCode=rel>>, accessed 27 November 2015.



**Slingerland, Edward**

2008 *What Science Offers the Humanities. Integrating Body and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Slone, D. Jason**

2004 *Theological Incorrectness. Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Sperber, Dan**

1996 *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

**Svensson, Jonas**

2011 Religionsvetenskap. Ett kontroversiellt ämne – *Grundskoletidningen* 3, 6–12.

**Thurfjell, David**

2015 *Det gudlösa folket. De postkristna svenskarna och religionen*. Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei.

**Tremlin, Todd**

2006 *Minds and Gods. The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Turner, Mark**

2014 *The Origin of Ideas. Blending, Creativity, and the Human Spark*.

**de Waal, Frans & Desmond Morris**

1982 *Chimpanzee Politics. Power and Sex Among Apes*. London: Cape.

**Whitehouse, Harvey**

2004 *Modes of Religiosity. A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

**Wilson, Edward O.**

1998 *Consilience. The Unity of Knowledge*. London: Abacus.



# Engaging the history of religions – from an Islamic studies perspective<sup>1</sup>

SUSANNE OLSSON

*Stockholm University*

LEIF STENBERG

*Lund University*

## Abstract

The future and relevance of the history of religions discipline in the Swedish context has been discussed lately. This article is a response to this debate from an Islamic studies perspective. The authors argue that the history of religions discipline may become more relevant if a more self-critical approach is adopted, an interdisciplinary attitude upheld, and if there is an openness to learn from other disciplines studying religion such as Islamic studies. Moreover, a reflection on 'history' in the history of religions is necessary if elitism and a too narrow definition of the discipline are to be avoided. Furthermore, the article addresses the question as to whether or not scholarly engagement in disseminating findings in public should be an intellectual and moral requirement.

*Keywords: History of Religions, Study of Religions, Islamic Studies, critical perspectives, engaged research*

This article seeks to engage with a broader debate on the study of religions that is currently influential in the discussions among scholars of the field in Sweden and perhaps elsewhere. To set the stage we highlight features relating to theory and method in the study of religions that we believe to be significant. This is followed by a brief discussion of the context of the relevant research in general. We then address the criticism sometimes expressed that scholars in the field of Islamic studies are primarily concerned with the 'contemporary' and the underlying presumptions of such statements.

---

1 The authors of this article specialise in contemporary Islamic studies. This article was presented as a draft at a workshop concerning the current status of research within the discipline of the history of religions at the Royal Academy of Letters in Sweden, 20–21 February 2014. The authors were asked by the conveners to give an introductory talk at a panel discussion with the title 'Research Policies versus Politicization of Religion'. A longer draft was later presented at the workshop 'The Trembling Tradition of the Humanistic Study of Religions', 11–12 December 2014, at Linneaus University, Sweden.

We then deal with scholarly involvement in the politicisation of religion and the involvement of scholars studying religion in public discussion. In the concluding paragraphs we discuss various approaches to the study of religion and especially our critical view of the history of religions as an academic field. Underpinning this discussion is an exploration of issues related to our scholarly choices and perspectives that concern how scholars within the study of Islam at large study 'religion' today.

Current global events have embedded Islam in political agendas and the political attention given to it influences not only popular interests and the media, but also the understanding of Islam by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These developments have given rise to increased demand for scholars studying Islam and Muslims and their broader social and cultural context. This is clear at universities, where scholars from a variety of disciplines, but focusing on the study of Islam, are often sought after to address students' need to learn about Islam, but also to serve a broad and varied public interest, in the media, and among civil servants and policy makers.<sup>2</sup> It is our view that such a development is not necessarily a threat to the study of religion in general.

Today there is an interest in religion, religious expression, practice, and experience in several disciplines and by scholars far beyond the study of religions and the specific discipline of the history of religions. As a result, scholars defining themselves as historians of religions face fierce competition in the quest for funding and in the process of Swedish universities' structural reorganisation. The latter makes the future for the history of religions discipline seem bleak for a variety of reasons. One is universities' preference for more inclusive labels such as 'religious studies' or the 'study of religions'.<sup>3</sup> Another is more internal and concerns the object of study within the discipline and what to be a historian of religions implies.

Linked to the idea of the politicisation of religion as well as the identity of the history of religions as a discipline is the question of whether or not scholars should engage in public debates on religious matters. The question is whether the ideal is to individually conduct research in ivory towers, disseminate the results as neutrally or reflexively as possible, and then remain largely silent – apart from engaging in discussion with students and,

---

2 In discussing the field of Islamic Studies Edward E. Curtis IV (2014) has observed that the large number of disciplinary perspectives represented in Islamic studies is what makes the contemporary study of Islam intellectually dynamic and vibrant.

3 Swedish: 'religionsvetenskap'. In Sweden, the *history of religions* as a separate discipline is only found at the universities in Lund (Center for Theology and Religious Studies), Stockholm (Faculty of Humanities) and Uppsala (Faculty of Theology).

perhaps, colleagues. Some of us may present our research in popular forms – which appear to be in demand, at least in Sweden, if the questions about the dissemination of research we are constantly asked in external and internal evaluations and by funding agencies are an indication. In this connection we should make an important distinction: here we are not primarily interested in questions about the dissemination of research, but rather in a more active engagement with society at large, especially in public debate, even though the public or audience for these two activities coexist and overlap. This latter remark notwithstanding, in this discussion we intend to examine what it means to be a *critical* scholar and how (or if) to be/become *engaged*. Hypothetically a self-critical approach would be an advantage in a discussion regarding the stances scholars of the history of religions take towards questions pertaining to their public role or to their function as critical and/or engaged scholars. However, it has to be acknowledged that there is, at least potentially, a difference between being critical and being engaged: such a self-critical attitude would be beneficial in a reflection on individual and collective approaches to the history of religions as an academic field. One thing is certain: the lack of academic entrepreneurship capable of building structures in the collective interest of the field is more than evident. Few historians of religion have engaged themselves in building institutions, centres, or any other academic framework that might improve the broader environment and the quality of research through the establishment of a larger critical mass in the Swedish context.

As far as we are aware there are no established practices or strategies pertaining to the study of religion that reflect the interests of the state, the public, and academia. The term ‘research policies’ can certainly be understood in various ways and relate to strategies established by public or private funding agencies, but also to local circumstances at universities and to the order of priorities identified by individual scholars. However, there is no doubt that, where Sweden is concerned, there are no broader national research policies in regard to the study of religions.

### **Engaging with the fields of the study of religions**

Theory, in the words of Catherine Bell, ‘is not just a tool to open a can of data. It is the gestalt against which data emerges, with the ability to illuminate something of the value of the methodological principles informing the context.’ (Bell 2006, 324.) In the history of religions vivid discussions on theory and method are commonplace, and the need to acknowledge how

one's perspectives and choice of methods and theories affect the analysis of the empirical material is generally agreed. In the broader field of the study of religions we find several subfields and various approaches ranging from reductionist to more essentialist perspectives on 'religion'. Subfields and approaches also relate to how the objects of our studies are to be approached in terms of engagement and the range of influence they may have upon our analyses. Depending on how scholars answer such questions, the result of one's research may be very different. Some scholars advocate a strict 'outsider' perspective, while some advocate a more empathetic and engaged approach towards an 'insider's' perspective. Such methodological issues are presently discussed among scholars of Islam in different disciplines, but also across disciplinary boundaries. This is perhaps more urgent in this field than in others because of the general currency of Islamophobic attitudes and the associated risk of scholars being accused of holding racist and Orientalist views when conducting research construed as 'too critical', whether by Muslims or non-Muslims. Furthermore, the diversity of disciplines studying common empirical fields is an additional factor that contributes to theoretical and methodological debates and renewal.

Within the framework of a secular academic approach 'religion' has to a large extent been defined in terms of beliefs, internal conditions, and systems of symbols. However, more recently, actions and behaviour have been added to the definition. Moreover, several scholars feel that the place of power and agency in analysing 'religion' needs to be strengthened – this follows the call for a scientifically founded critical approach (Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997; Lincoln 2003). Talal Asad shows how the term 'religion' has been conceptualised in an essentialist manner as a transhistorical and irreducible transculturally distinct autonomous sphere. Asad is critical of Clifford Geertz's (1973) well-known definition of religion that refers to interior moods and motivations with a primary focus on faith. Asad's critique of definitions such as Geertz's is largely based on the separation of religion from power. He regards such definitions as part of a post-Enlightenment development in which belief became the only legitimate space for religion. Peter Beyer builds on similar ideas. He identifies key aspects of the postmodern era by describing the development of structurally differentiated systems with their own specific functions such as economy and jurisprudence. In Beyer's perspective challenges unsolved by other systems leave space for religion to handle existential issues (Beyer 1994; Beyer 2006). However, the ideas presented by Asad suggest that Beyer's perspective could be discussed and, indeed, critically elaborated and complemented, since the idea of a

compartmentalisation is problematic in analysing, for instance, contemporary piety movements in which 'religion' is not limited to a specific space in society. This also supports the view that it is essential to consider power and agency in scholarly work, for example in regard to the significance of non-Muslims' views for the understanding of Islam in general. Indeed, current discussions in societies about Islam contain a variety of non-Muslim actors expressing views about Islam that in a discursive mode becomes part of how Islam is understood by non-Muslims as well as Muslims.

Moreover, Talal Asad shows how definitions of the kind advocated by Clifford Geertz are effectively developed from a Christian and primarily protestant perspective that has made Christianity *the* model of religion, reflecting a Eurocentric and Christian perspective. Asad states that all definitions are bound by their context. This permits him to be sceptical of or reject universal definitions of any kind, a position that finds expression in his well-known statement:

My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes (Asad 2006, 29).

The quotation underlines Asad's position that every definition is contextually and discursively bound. Andrew McKinnon's rejection of essentialist definitions expresses a similar understanding:

[T]here is no essence of religion outside the discourse of religion. There is no religion *per se*, *pour soi*, or *an sich*. Of course, concepts like 'religion' have real social consequences, and are important constitutive elements in the construction of global, national, and local social formations. In that sense, however, there is such a 'thing' as religion – or at least, it is a term we cannot do without, and we 'know' what it means (McKinnon 2002, 81).<sup>4</sup>

McKinnon focuses on the usage of 'religion' and the role of 'religion' as part of various constructions, thereby suggesting that religions are not autonomous or immutable social realities but components of various sociohistorical articulations or constellations. Hence, power issues are central to our understanding of religion and should not be neglected. The term

---

<sup>4</sup> For an example of an analysis of a process in which Islam is discursively produced, see Stenberg 1996.

'power' can, of course, be understood in many ways and exist at several levels. It pertains to the distribution of political power in society, but also at a more foundational societal and private level, regarding, for example, gender roles. As an academic field the study of religions can benefit from a social constructionist perspective that contributes to highlighting power discourses involved in religious interpretations in a national context. In the case of Muslim piety movements in Egypt and Syria movement actors have become involved in power struggles at several social and political levels. Islamisation processes in a society affect the governmental policy of Islam as well as other Islamic positions in a dialectical relationship, with a resulting increase of Islamisation (Bayat 2007; Olsson 2015). 'Islam' therefore cannot be seen as a self-contained and internally defined phenomenon or religion. Hence, the dialectical relationship affecting positions on Islam includes societies at large regardless of whether institutions, movements, or individuals are Muslim or not. Furthermore, the relationship between power and religion can also be played out in regard to the performance of rituals within a family or what is commonly understood as 'our history' within a certain local group of believers.

Social constructionist approaches are, according to Vivien Burr, linked to each other by what she calls a 'family resemblance', which is constituted by common assumptions or approaches. One foundational social constructionist approach is a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. An inherent critique of positivism and empiricism is, in Burr's view, unavoidable and leads to a perspective in which all categories used are regarded as arbitrary and constructed, as well as historically and culturally specific. Like Asad Burr rejects universal definitions. Moreover, knowledge and truth are understood as constructed and sustained in human social interaction and processes. Consequently, a perspective that calls for contextualised analyses in which knowledge and truth are seen as negotiated understandings is required (Burr 2003, 2ff). Such a perspective naturally also affects conceptualisations of terms such as 'religion'.

To some extent it seems that the problems concerning various definitions of 'religion' are impossible to circumvent. Catherine Bell critically comments on the discussion that the study of religions does not really have a field since we have not agreed upon a common definition of 'religion' (Bell 2006, 316). She cites Mark C. Taylor, who wrote: 'The field of religious studies – if it is a field – is in a perpetual state of crisis because it can neither define its object of study nor agree on distinctive methods or strategies of interpretations.' (Taylor 2004, B4.) Bell states that if there were a common definition, we would



scarcely make any progress, but rather stagnate. 'If the goal is to determine which theory of religion is the best, we would have to ask best for what,' she argues (Bell 2006, 324). Bell holds that: 'Critical terms are not critical because they contain answers but because they point to the crucial questions at the heart of how scholars are currently experiencing their traditions of inquiry and the data they seek to encounter.' (Bell 1997, 220.) Bell's statement indicates that she holds the idea that questions are more significant than answers, but also that the questions mirror the status of a certain scientific tradition in regard to the experience of researchers and their choice of empirical material.

### **No view comes from nowhere**

For Thomas Nagel, although every research project is to some extent ethnocentric, the researcher cannot simply abdicate from engaging in complex debates. His answer to the dilemma between ethnocentrism and silence is expressed as follows: 'In understanding that there is no 'view from nowhere' (...), reflexivity answers the question by whom, for whom and for what reasons, and allows for criticism from the same place as well as from other places.' (Flood 1999, 40. See also Flood 1999, 148–149) In Nagel's opinion reflexivity is an important analytical tool in the sense that it can be deployed to help the researcher or scholar avoid merely reproducing what 'insiders' may have to say. His statement acknowledges the risk of being criticised by 'insiders' (or 'stakeholders', as we would prefer to say)<sup>5</sup> as an expression of reductionism (see McCutcheon 2001, 21ff, a chapter entitled 'Redescribing "Religion" as Social Formation'; see also Waardenburg 2003). Unquestionably, any analysis can be conducted in a way a stakeholder may not like. However, if they are stakeholders linked to a particular confession they should not necessarily have the right to determine how their religious practice or theology should be analysed or scientifically understood.

---

5 In order not to display 'insiders' and 'outsiders' as coherent or dichotomies the term 'stakeholder' is chosen and conceptualised to emphasise an inclusive approach and the interplay between representatives of religions (the faithful, the priests, the '*ulama*') and societies at large. At one level a discursive development of public debates on Islam and its meaning certainly contains a variety of personal or impersonal stakeholders such as local imams and nationalist right wing parties – all of them influencing how Islam is understood in the public space on an ongoing basis. Hence, stakeholders with different interests overlap in common discourses, but more general debates on 'Islam' containing a number of different stakeholders may also influence specific theological and local interpretations of Islam in the sense that they colour what is seen as significant from a confessional milieu and in need of an 'Islamic' answer. An example of the latter is the ambition among Muslim scholars to understand Islam in relation to terms such as 'democracy', 'human rights', and 'gender'.

It is clear that to a stakeholder an analysis of processes of Islamisation may present an image that he or she totally rejects. Scholars may conclude at times that something looks like the Islamisation of a thing or phenomenon usually perceived as un-Islamic, while others may regard this as a colonialist or Orientalist conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

A relevant question therefore concerns the role of stakeholders and the extent to which they influence our work – our conceptualisation of terms and perspectives. It is clearly important to discuss the scholarly stance regarding dialogue and empathy and how scholars respond when a stakeholder reacts negatively to scholarly writing. In this context it is important to stress how scholars handle and discuss stakeholders' opinions about research. Above all, the impossibility of a universal definition of religion has been noted. This includes a rejection of essentialist perspectives and asserts the need for scholars to be engaged in robust and critical inquiry. Being critical does not mean that a study must be negative or hostile to stakeholders' interpretations of a religious tradition or attempts from left or right wing political parties to determine what 'Islam' really states about a specific question. It is rather an analytical attempt to remain as neutral in regard to confession and/or politics as possible, and not allow stakeholders to control either the analysis or the scholarly language.

Russell T. McCutcheon discusses the conflictual situations that can occur when scholars negotiate and try to resolve issues of difference with the object of study. He shows how scholars with an engaged and empathetic approach can criticise other approaches for being dehumanising in studying people's religious practices and traditions in ways believers have not authorised. This would be to neglect the 'moral requirement' of gaining consent when theorising and analysing: an engagement in a consensual conversation is called for (McCutcheon 2006, 721–722). This resembles an updated version of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's well-known and highly problematic phrasing that 'no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers' (Smith 1959, 42 in McCutcheon 2006, 722). Such a statement is based on a fixed view of 'religion', or at least on supporting a specific version of a religious tradition. Such an attitude carries several problems that not only concern definitions of religious practices and traditions and their history, but also how 'religion' is produced.

McCutcheon discusses this in relation to the question of who is entitled to feel offended by scholarly work. Any answer to such a question

---

<sup>6</sup> See Johnson 2008 for a discussion on scholarship concerning Hawaiian traditions, which illuminates discussion on authenticity and identity as well as conflicts between insider and outsider accounts.

demonstrates how scholars normalise standards for belonging to a specific group (McCutcheon 2006, 723, note 6). Undoubtedly, a consequence is that such a scholarly position must engage in debate and conflict regarding interpretative authority. This discussion is developed in an article in which McCutcheon uses the phrase 'no cost Other', in which he problematizes the definition of Otherness (McCutcheon 2006, 730ff). He asks if it is not the case that methods differ depending on the object of study and if a scholar should be silent if he or she cannot say anything positive about the people studied (McCutcheon 2006, 732). In his opinion it is quite natural to choose to study objects that one can feel empathy towards or that are not too different. Moreover, McCutcheon's article also problematizes that if a scholar chooses to study a disliked phenomenon then it would probably be much more difficult to maintain neutrality and to allow those studied to represent themselves. He shows that the terminology used often illustrates when scholars are dealing with 'no cost Others' or other Others (McCutcheon 2006, 746 note 34). In a similar vein Asef Bayat notes the common practice of not speaking about the terms 'religious' and 'nonreligious', but rather differentiating between 'religious' and 'more religious'. This 'over-religiosity', as Bayat calls it, is often expressed in terms like 'fundamentalism', 'revivalism', 'conservatism', 'fanaticism', and 'extremism' (Bayat 2007, 1).

### **Human and humane**

Those searching for a dialogue between scholars and those they study may risk not only striving for consent but also assent, allowing informants to control the scholar's research. Russell T. McCutcheon finds it difficult to believe that our research subjects would consent to being, from their point of view, misrepresented (McCutcheon 2006, 725 and note 8). He states that the approach of consensual conversation belongs to a liberal humanist tradition where the conversation, i.e. the study of religions, 'ha[s] something to do with its being both deeply human *and* humane' (McCutcheon 2006, 726) and that there is an underlying commonality that all humans share 'making them all participants in a common dialogue that addresses and, ideally, overcomes the particularities that might otherwise divide them' (McCutcheon 2006, 726). The study of religions thus becomes something that will 'bridge the gap' between the Self and the Other (McCutcheon 2006, 727) in the sense of trying to engage in a 'mutually beneficial dialogue with a consenting Other' (McCutcheon 2006, 728). This is a discipline that not only explains that there is a common bond between human beings, but also

claims that this bond is religion and that the study of religions can explain its true character.

Furthermore, following a social constructionist approach, McCutcheon's outlook is linked to critical remarks on scholarly approaches to the term 'humanism'. These are related to our understanding of identity issues and are significant for an understanding of why terms such as 'personality' are problematic, as they may entail an essentialist view of individuals. Vivien Burr holds that Humanism:

refers to the idea that the person is a unified, coherent and rational agent who is the author of their own experience and its meaning. Humanism is essentialist; it assumes that there is an essence at the core of an individual that is unique, coherent and unchanging. But it also says that the individual's experience and the meaning it holds originates within the person, in their essential nature. 'Essential nature' here could refer to a number of things such as personality traits, attitudes, masculinity and so on (Burr 2003, 53–4).

A social constructionist approach attempts to move the focus from ideas of a distinctive essence of individuals to the social realm and linguistics. Language may contain elements that construct a person and language as above all a social phenomenon occurring in a context between people in which identity constructions take place. The self is therefore in constant flux, which it has to be if the self is, to a large extent, a product of social interactions and language (Burr 2003, 53–54). 'Some subject positions are more temporary or even floating and therefore *who* we are is constantly in flux, always dependent upon the changing flow of positions we negotiate within social interaction.' (Burr 2003, 120) 'With the poststructuralist view of language we are drawn into a view of talk, writing and social encounters as sites of struggle and conflict, where power relations are acted out and contested.' (Burr 2003, 54–55) This perspective is linked to the understanding of a discursive involvement of stakeholders in the formation of what is 'Islamic' or not, and to a more general struggle over interpretative authority in the context of religious traditions.

### **Contemporary or historical focus in the *history of religions***

In our understanding the criticism is sometimes voiced that Islamic studies scholars are currently focused on the contemporary historical setting, thus neglecting the study of history. Some historians of religions highlight this

as part of a general trend in the contemporary study of religions. Of the German context Rüpke states:

Contemporary research increasingly tends to concentrate on current issues, for instance the relationship between religion and politics, religion and violence, religion and the mass media, religion and the environment (including the economic environment), or between religion and ethical demands and legal systems.<sup>7</sup>

One understanding of this criticism is that 'history' means ancient history, or at least 'older' than the present, and that 'history' is lost due to the focus on current versions of Islam. Even if this concern addressed by some scholars is appreciated, it is equally important to note that many scholars within the field of Islamic studies have language skills to approach sources not only in, for example, English or Swedish. Although scholars do not need to know hieroglyphs to do this, many have spent years mastering, for example, Arabic or Turkish. Moreover, most Nordic Islamic studies scholars have a training in the history of religions, which equips us to avoid addressing our objects of study in an ahistorical manner, and to perceive contemporary empirical material as historically situated.

It is important to recognise the immense emphasis within most historical and current Muslim interpretations on early Islamic history and sources. In the case of contemporary interpretations of Islam 'the past' is continuously drawn upon to inform the present as well as the future. In interpretations of Islam this takes place to such a large extent that in Muslim contexts the early history of Islam is universal, not bound to a certain period in time and events in the community, and the acts of the prophet Muhammad are to be individually or collectively emulated and translated into contemporary societies. Without a knowledge of these sources and Islamic history in general scholars would be unable to analyse contemporary phenomena that are considered Islamic. For example, studying the phenomenon of 'othering' in contemporary Muslim discourses is a field of research that concerns many scholars studying Islam and Muslims today. The polemics found in the contemporary discussion regarding 'othering' are often founded on medieval sources, dating from early Islamic history. Another distinctively contemporary example concerns the actions of the so-called Islamic State

---

<sup>7</sup> This has been noted by Jörg Rüpke 285–6, who addresses the contemporary research focus on current issues. He refers to Spineto 2009, 47, cited here, and an analysis of German *Religionswissenschaft* with similar conclusions. (Wissenschaftsrat 2010.)

and how the statements made by the self-proclaimed caliph Ibrahim (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, b. 1971) have been countered by current Muslim scholars from around the world in 'a letter to Baghdadi'. To analyse al-Baghdadi's arguments and the letter scholars need a thorough familiarity with early Islamic history, the development of the caliphate, jurisprudence, and the theological and ideological developments in the ideas of an 'Islamic state' or 'Islamic caliphate' that developed following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. A third and telling example is how this movement characterises Sufis and Shi'a Muslims as enemies of true Islam and rejects the use of reason in favour of a literal reading of revelation.<sup>8</sup> To explain this, and the roots of such an interpretation, we need to access early sources. In our view a deeper knowledge of contemporary Islam in its various forms must include a study of its early history. However, if we are to make sense of how the term 'tradition' is used in various ways and for various reasons today, the starting point must be contemporary history. Hence, to construct a dichotomy between the words 'history' and 'contemporary' becomes meaningless, and any value judgment attached to 'historical' studies as being of more value than studies of the contemporary becomes scientifically irrelevant.

We acknowledge that narratives concerning history, among scholars as well as believers, arise in situations framed by contesting claims for legitimacy and authenticity, influencing identity-making and delimitation of in-groups and out-groups. A historiographical method in the study of religions approaches the present chronologically and regards the contemporary as a result of choices made in the past, drawing attention to the need to historically situate, or contextualise, empirical material. It is not so important in this context if the study starts in the contemporary era or at a particular distant historical moment. However, an understanding of the past is always informed by scholars' current questions (or what scholars study), and serves to create a definition of the present situation and to contain an orientation towards the future (Rüpke 2011).<sup>9</sup>

---

8 The rejection of Greek philosophy has its counterpart in the jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). See Ibn Taymiyyah and Hallaq 1993.

9 This perspective is actually compatible with much of the more sociologically inclined perspectives prevalent today. For example, scholars using Social Movement Theories (SMT) acknowledge this in studies on strategies found in social movements to define a present problem, to present a solution to this problem, and to motivate participants to engage in solving the problem, i.e. mobilisation. The solution in social movements that can be characterised as religiously fundamentalist, for example, often addresses an immoral or capitalistic present, often labelled as a westernisation, that can be remedied with a correct understanding of a golden past that ought to be implemented in the present to reach an authentic future. See for example Wiktorowicz 2003. See also Olsson 2012 and 2014.

Moreover, an ahistorical focus on the contemporary sometimes disturbs the authors of this article. In our opinion a focus on lived religion appears to be increasing that is partly due to the promotion of non-essentialist views of Islam and Muslims. The argument is that it is important to avoid generalisations, to study a limited number of individuals and their practices, and narratives about their religious tradition. This is certainly a significant field of study. However, it is regrettable that textual studies are not regarded as being as important as is the study of the religion lived by the many. Although Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive field rejects scholarly essentialist understandings of Islam, there is a scholarly need to acknowledge that there is an 'Islam out there', bound in time and space, to which Muslims and non-Muslims refer, under circumstances that relate to what Eickelman and Piscatori have termed an objectification of religion (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 38f). Such an acknowledgement does not imply that Islam is from a scholarly perspective universally or essentially defined, as Asad also states in his rejection of universal definitions of religion, mentioned above. It is not the case that Asad, or Edward Said for that matter, intends that scholars of Islam should all become ethnographers studying lived religion in order to avoid an Orientalist or essentialist position, but it has surely brought the idea to the fore that there is a need to study 'real' people and their practices, and not merely texts. Rather, what they address are the scholarly perspectives and assumptions that cause us to understand and reflect on what we study. In our opinion there is a need to call for an increased analysis of texts *as part of* contemporary lived religion. Jocelyne Cesari has discussed this in an article regarding research in which she comments on the ethnographic dominance in studies of lived religion:

The problem is that it is not possible to treat Islam as a mere artifact of anthropological study because Muslims identify with Islam (...). Like it or not, anthropologists and social scientists have to work with the universalist claims of Islam to a certain extent because Muslims themselves make such claims and continually calibrate their practices to them. In fact, references to what is right or wrong, just or unjust, possible or not possible within Islam are largely determined by sources and materials that anthropologists have unfortunately excluded from their domain of research. Although I agree with Abu Lughod that it is a healthy impulse to study a religion through what its practitioners say and do, it is by no means sufficient because the debates about the nature of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim themselves shape people's actions and discourse. Islamic texts and sources are both polyvocal

and contradictory, and there are dialogues between texts and practices as well [as] discussions that are internal to the domain of practice (Cesari 2009, 16).

This suggests that we must avoid excluding the textual dimension in people's lives today when conducting research in the field of 'lived religion'. To fulfil Cesari's ideas the scholarly community at large would clearly benefit from a strengthened presence of historians of religions in the study of contemporary expressions of religion. In addition a study of the role of stakeholders' influence on interpretations of Islam would add an analytical layer demonstrating that scholarly examination of how Islam is understood and practised is not a question that can be determined by a study of things termed 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' only. The larger non-Muslim context is an important reference point not only for scholars of Islam, but also for Muslim producers of the religion. Hence, our point is threefold. We argue that it is certainly important to address non-Muslim stakeholders and their position with regard to understandings of Islam and Muslim practices, and to do this from a perspective in which the ambiguity and drudge of daily life in general is taken into account. However, we also state that a textual dimension is important if it is desired to give an account and analysis of contemporary Muslim life.

### **Uncritical and neutral descriptors**

In our view one risk in regard to the politicisation of religion is that we are becoming uncritical: processes of politicisation influence what scholars choose to study. In relation to this it should come as no surprise that some scholars may present 'neutral' descriptions of a religious tradition, perhaps because of the political or human desire to make the world a better place. At the same time colonial guilt has long beset Islamic Studies – not least since Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, which forced an ongoing self-critical discussion among scholars of Islam. The result is that to critically analyse a religious tradition, or a part of it, may be seen as a humiliating assault on those belonging to this tradition, but avoiding such analysis risks reducing us to performing apologetics or avoiding challenge, and making the study of religions focus on 'the nice guys' or practices that are considered positive. Scholars of religion can thus act as religious interlocutors of what religion is, or ought to be.<sup>10</sup> In a sense it is an admirable mission to inform

---

<sup>10</sup> As a parallel example, see Schielke (2010) for a critical discussion on how 'Islam' is understood and utilised in the field of the anthropology of Islam, where he argues that 'there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam' (Schielke 2010, 2).



the public that not all Muslims are 'bad Muslims' as part of a postcolonial strategy of liberating Islam and Muslims from a stereotyped and negative image. By extension this may of course bring criticism from groups, like the Swedish Humanist Association, which oppose the presence of religion in the public space. They may claim that we are pro-Islam, uncritical Islam-lovers, or even crypto-Muslims or they may say that we are Leftists or cultural relativists. We believe that this is also what Aaron Hughes wishes to highlight when he criticises apologetic approaches in Islamic studies in his two works *Situating Islam* and *Theorizing Islam*, and it highlights the need to subject our scholarly discourse and practice to critical inquiry. We also need to discuss what – if any – public role we should have.

### Public debates

Perhaps it is enough to teach courses at universities that encourage our students to reflect critically on freedom and knowledge and hope that *they* will practise such ideals in their future lives. However, if scholars come to an understanding that they *should* participate in public debates, one significant question concerns whether historians of religions should uphold the specific perspectives to be brought into public discussion. Considering the above discussion, are we to retain a neutral or even detached stance concerning values, or should historians of religions advance values such as gender equality, human rights, and democracy? Or should he or she go even further and take a committed *political* stance in public discussions on religion? These questions can and should certainly be answered differently by individual scholars, but perhaps there are lessons, positive as well as negative, to draw from the experience of colleagues or from other academic disciplines such as political science and economics. A key question concerns whether historians of religions are bound by any general and public discussions on religions. Does the discipline of the history of religions generate an understanding of religions that can contribute to public debate?

In this context, moreover, we should also like to point to an outcome of participation in public discussion and the general desire to disseminate research findings to a wider audience. What is stated and what is written becomes public in a completely different sense than if research findings are only published in the field's academic journals. One aspect of this is that engagement in public discussion in every media requires certain skills, and this involves more than explaining and analysing complex phenomena in a few

words. However, this requires a pedagogical and professional training that is often neglected by academics and universities as being of a lesser value.

Another neglected area usually considered to be of lesser value concerns whether scholars of religion have a certain responsibility in their capacity as civil servants to contribute to policy-making or the training of civil servants in general.<sup>11</sup> For example, how should we respond to requests from foreign ministries or other state authorities for briefings about recent developments in contemporary Muslim movements, or for reports for a state funded institution or think-tank on the role of mosques as vehicles for integration? In our case, working within the field of Islamic Studies, these possibilities and questions are always present and may influence how we choose research topics and how we approach and select our material. A further question we have to ask concerns who will respond to such requests if we do not. The point is not to glorify our knowledge and perspective, but to be open to discuss the role of academics and their relationship first to the state, but also to private institutions that feel a need for the scholarly knowledge produced by the broader field of the study of religions. Moreover, the increased visibility of research findings through popular publication outlets, the writing of reports, or participation in public discussions and social media makes them vulnerable. An implicit consequence of increased visibility is that statements, texts, or conclusions can be taken out of context and used to provide support for views not shared by scholars. Research findings may also be used by stakeholders, individuals, and/or groups, and become significant parts of the current production of religion.

If it is accepted that scholars of religions should engage in public debates on TV, radio, and the old and new media, scholars may need to develop their skills and expertise if they are to contribute their scientifically informed knowledge and present different perspectives on *important* matters in political debate and public discussion in general. For example, scholars should be able – and perhaps trained – to discuss the rise in Islamophobia and fascism, as well as the growing expression of fundamentalism, in Europe. From our perspective this is very much a feature of the ‘politicisation of religion’. Moreover, critical or negative discussions on religion in the public space stem not only from a right-wing perspective, but also from the so-called New Atheists and a general public that may be suspicious of what they consider to be overtly religious practices. Such a perspective can be oppressive of others merely for their religious belonging and practice. The

---

11 In this respect it should be noted that Swedish higher learning institutions are all, more or less, state universities and their employees are state officials.

idea that religious belonging *per se* creates irrational and violent individuals who constitute a danger to the free and rational world is not uncommon in secular society. These opinions are usually framed within discourses on what constitutes good and bad or true and false religion, and are associated with umbrella terms like 'the war on terror' in which 'religion' becomes a security issue. Participating in public discussion is, in a sense, part of the intellectual's responsibility. We therefore believe that there are legitimate reasons to avoid participation in debate in the public space and media if, for example, it proves too time-consuming and the result is difficult to quantify. However, if public discussion revolves around issues intimately related to the scholarly study of religions, it might be considered part of our academic and intellectual responsibility to participate, and silence on the part of historians of religions is not an option. It is unlikely that the general public's demand for knowledge concerning the historic or contemporary role of religions will disappear.

### **What should we do?**

On the basis of all this we can therefore reflect on the current status of the history of religions, the role of historians of religions, and how the field might develop. Today this particular field within the broader field of the study of religions approaches its subject matter as temporal, historically situated, and socially constructed by humans and institutions that usually represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, or divine. The history of religions is not merely descriptive, however – or we, at least, hold that it should not be. We believe there is a point in refraining from merely asking, where Islamism is concerned, *what* is seen as authentic Islam by some Muslims. In line with Armando Salvatore's argument we should be concerned rather with the 'what for' – analyse *why* they regard something as genuine and *how* they authenticate Islam as such (see Salvatore 1995, 194–195). Historians of religions might probe more than the *what* and the *who* with questions such as *Who speaks? To whom? What is said (written, done...)?* by also asking the *why? Why* did X say Y to Z? What does the historic and contemporary empirical material tell us? In relation to this we stress the analytical aspects of locating power and agency, and this is of course the case for those scholars who use historical material from an ancient past, as well as those who focus on the historical material of the present. Furthermore, an analysis of power relationships and agency is important not only for a consideration of a religious tradition's *explicit* political interpretation and

practice, but also for interpretation and practice that are not visible *at first sight*. Things pertaining to the ambiguities of the everyday life of people are in our view just as political as those speaking about a religious state or a religiously motivated and justified revolution.

A scientifically founded and critical approach to Islamic studies or the history of religions may result in criticism that affects what scholars choose to study, how that study is conducted, to whom findings are presented, and if scholarship is made available to a general audience. One allegation concerns scholarly reductionism. Considering our origins in the realm of theology, this is really nothing new. The claim that scholars of religions oversimplify complex phenomena is a strategy to silence critical voices. However, it is important to uphold the principle that scholars are not in any way obliged to consider any confessional claim of transcendence or sacredness as anything other than a truth claim and as expressions of power in a historic or contemporary situation. Furthermore, the claim itself is an empirical object that we need to study through historical and critical inquiry. Moreover, we should be continuously self-critical of our research to avoid falling into an empathetic trap or studying only those expressions of religion we personally prefer, like to have 'dialogue' with, or about which we are able to write positively. In sum, to paraphrase Russell McCutcheon, scholars are not meant to be caretakers. We are to be critical inquirers providing independent and informed analysis in the context of the scholarly community and society at large. Why else should we be financed by tax money?

### **A critical perspective**

The above arguments correspond to Thomas B. Ellis's understanding of the contemporary field of the study of religions as being dominated by two approaches. The first refers to non-natural universals, advocated by those with an essentialist view of religion, 'a philosophically suspect theological agenda' (Ellis 2008, 281), that is 'beyond empirical verification or falsification' (Ellis 2008, 283). Such a perspective must be shunned by the history of religions. Ellis assigns to the category of non-naturalists 'all theologians and religious practitioners of the supernaturalist variety' and these 'are the people *about whom* and not *with whom* scholars of religion talk. To confuse this issue – the very issue at the heart of appeals to dialogical studies and their conjunctive constructions – is to confuse the subject of explanation with the means of explanation.' (Ellis 2008, 287. This reflects the discussion by McCutcheon 2006.) In the Swedish context this perspective is not espe-

cially common in the broader study of religions. However, it overlaps with approaches cultivated primarily in departments of theology.

The second category is a particularist ethnographical approach to culture, 'a quasi-dogmatic postmodern anxiety about natural generalizations' (Ellis 2008, 281). This is what Jonathan Z. Smith critically calls an 'ethos of particularism' that designates the approach to cultures as particular and rejects cross-cultural comparisons (Smith 2004, 368). Dense descriptions where language skills and fieldwork are the primary competences of scholars are privileged in such approaches (Discussed in Ellis 2008, 280 who also mentions Smith 2004). This is described by Thomas B. Ellis as a postcolonial 'expression of neo-colonial ambition. Guilt-ridden, theoretical hesitance.' (Ellis 2008, 281) Smith argues that it is an ethos that rejects classification, comparison, and explanation and the result is the requirement to listen to the Other, to dialogue, which is seen as the antidote to imperialism (Ellis 2008, 281). This resembles, according to Ellis, the discussion by Russell T. McCutcheon mentioned above (Ellis 2008, 282). Moreover, Ellis points out that this perspective also encourages scholars to perceive the Other's position as a potential self-position, and as such results in a kind of ecumenical dialogue (Ellis 2008, 281–282). Among such scholars are, for example, Gavin Flood, Diana Eck, and Robert Orsi. They advocate a dialogue and 'hospitality', as well as a need to re-examine their own tradition and benefit from the study of Others. As such this approach strives to be 'liberating' (Ellis 2008, 282) and a part of engaged research, but, in our opinion, is not one conducted in a critical academic manner.

The above implies that there is at least a third approach. This approach does not call for an essentialist understanding of 'religion' and it does not advocate an empathetic dialogical research agenda. Rather, it calls for a perspective on 'religion' founded on an outlook in which religion is a social phenomenon in its broadest sense related to power. Hence, a critical perspective needs to include aspects of power. Research that aims to empower or to contribute to the liberation of someone or something is not contrary to such an approach, but it needs to take the topics discussed by many of the historians of religions quoted in this article seriously and reflectively, realising that everything we do is re-presenting 'the Other', even when we have an ambition to 'give them a voice'. Moreover, we should also self-critically reflect on and clarify why we as scholars are interested in some fields and questions, and why we avoid others. As McCutcheon argues, 'the world around us does not jump up and tell us what is important and interesting' (McCutcheon 2001, 87).

At the heart of the discussion here are methodological views and stances concerning how engaged a researcher should be and in what ways. Engaged research can be empowering. For example, researchers can illustrate unequal power relationships, and research results can function as a social critique. This can be accomplished with or without an explication of normative suggestions about how to solve the problem in focus – where the first approach is probably easier to defend as being as neutral and objective as a scholarly perspective can be within the study of religions. The second may risk being criticised as activism and as ideological (supposedly non-neutral) research, even if the difference between them may not always be clear.

A problematic methodological question is the extent to which scholars have the right to speak on behalf of other people, no matter how well intentioned they may be. Some social constructionists favour the view that insiders should be given voices, and that the scholar's account of a matter should not be the only one presented. This would, they argue, bring about a more democratic and coequal form of research (Burr 2003, 155ff.). However, although the idea that stakeholders' voices should be heard is widespread, it is important to remember that it is the scholars who decide who will be heard and what aspects of their voices will be chosen (McCutcheon 2006, 734). We do not agree with the idea of some 'relativists' that all languages are equally valid. We suggest that scholars need an analytical scientific language that can be used cross-culturally to produce generalisable outcomes, albeit not in the sense of grand theories (see for example Hammer and Sørensen 2010, 53). Moreover, when a voice is allowed to be heard it is usually accompanied by an explanation: 'We put *our* words into *their* mouths and, for whatever reason, fail to recognize the sound of our own voices.' (McCutcheon 2006, 740) We do not simply describe or present reality *as it is*. Rather, a representation is always involved, what we do is to represent only one version of several. It is therefore better described as a 'translation' (McCutcheon 2006, 741ff.). The attentive reader may have sensed that the authors of this article are hesitant towards perspectives and methods that can be characterised as 'postcolonial', deconstructive, or relativist. This stems from a language-use based emphatically on the desire to avoid the pretence of having an objective scientific language that is 'better' than other languages to describe the world, an ethnocentric view. Spineto states that if we are to struggle against ethnocentrism a logical consequence will be a critical analysis of scholarly patterns of knowledge production in our own environments – a task that will be performed with tools manufactured and conceptualised by European and North American academia. However, these tools are more or less used at a

global level. He concludes: 'Perhaps, then, the tradition of historico-religious studies may provide a solution to these problems.' (Spineto 2009, 48.)

This perspective is perhaps a more pressing issue for scholars with a focus on the political and/or Islamist interpretations and practices of Islam to address, given the current tense global situation and 'the war on terror'. In discussing the study of cultural processes Spineto states that the search for models is founded on complementary data and linked to historical data. He also highlights the need to create a continuity between the studies of the contemporary and of the past 'provided that they are redirected to respond to the needs of present culture' (Spineto 2009, 49). Spineto finally suggests an 'interdisciplinary dialogue' that would apply 'research tools with an awareness of their social and cultural implications' (Spineto 2009, 49). Hence, a historical-critical method and historiographical awareness are crucial if the problems we all recognise concerning matters in the study of religions or society in general are to be addressed, but this will be done from a position in which 'history' is produced in the present.

If we wish the history of religions to be a critical discipline, we need to consider these points. If we do not, we risk finding ourselves in merely non-naturalist theological or particularist ethnographical approaches oriented towards empathy and dialogue.

### Concluding comments

The authors believe that it is not enough for us as historians of religions merely to describe and critically interpret the 'world of religion'. The history of religions appears today as a discipline in the backwater of Islamic studies and in the broader field of the study of religions. Perhaps it would be good to adopt a more self-critical approach that avoids the elitism that only contributes to the fading of the status of the discipline in general. A first and possibly decisive step might be to embrace a more interdisciplinary approach and learn from other disciplines' study of religions. A second might be to reinvigorate the discipline by providing society with informed knowledge about the historic and contemporary role of religion. It is not fanciful to think that a greater presence of historians of religions in public and academic discussions on religion would improve the likelihood of increased funding. The question of whether historians of religion are exempt from an intellectual or moral obligation to improve life conditions in general is certainly linked to the latter.<sup>12</sup>

---

12 Cf. Theses on Feuerbach, 11, 'Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.' Marx 1845.

\* \* \*

SUSANNE OLSSON is Professor of History of Religions at Stockholm University, Sweden.  
E-mail: susanne.olsson@rel.su.se

LEIF ERIK STENBERG is Professor of Islamology and Director for Centre for Middle Eastern studies at Lund University. E-mail: leif.stenberg@cme.lu.se.

### *Bibliography*

#### **Asad, Talal**

- 1993 *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press.  
2006 Responses – David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (eds), *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, 206–41. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

#### **Bayat, Asef**

- 2007 *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

#### **Bell, Catherine**

- 1997 *Ritual: Dimensions and Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
2006 Culture: What Does One Do With It Now? – *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 18 (4), 315–24.

#### **Beyer, Peter**

- 1994 *Religion and Globalisation*. London: Sage Publications.  
2006 *Religions in global society*. London: Routledge.

#### **Burr, Vivien**

- 2003 *Social Constructionism*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

#### **Cesari, Jocelyne**

- 2009 Islam in the West: from immigration to global Islam. *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 8, 148–75.

#### **Curtis IV, Edward E.**

- 2014 Ode to Islamic Studies: Its Allure, Its Danger, Its Power. – *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*. <<http://www.equinoxpub.com/blog/2014/05/ode-to-islamic-studies-its-allure-its-danger-its-power-reflections-on-islamic-studies/>>, accessed 9 September 2015.

#### **Eickelman, Dale F. & James Piscatori**

- 1996 *Muslim Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



**Ellis, Thomas B.**

2008 *Of And and Of: the Politics of Grammar and the Study of Religion. – Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, 270–90.

**Flood, Gavin**

1999 *Beyond phenomenology: rethinking the study of religion*. London: Cassell.

**Geertz, Clifford**

1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

**Hammer, Olav and Sørensen, Jesper**

2010 *Religion i människors medvetanden och samhällen*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

**Hughes, Aaron**

2007 *Situating Islam: the Past and Future of an Academic Discipline*. London: Equinox.

2012 *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*. Sheffield: Equinox.

**Ibn Taymīyah, Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm and Hallaq, Wael B.**

1993 *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Wael B. Hallaq Oxford: Clarendon Press

**Johnson, Greg**

2008 *Authenticity, Invention, Articulation: Theorizing Contemporary Hawaiian Traditions from the Outside – Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, 243–58.

**Letter to Baghdadi**

2014 *Open letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias ‘Abu Bakr Al - Baghdadi’, And to the fighters and followers of the self - declared ‘Islamic State’ Al-Baghdadi*. <<http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>>, accessed 4 August 2015.

**Lincoln, Bruce**

2003 *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.

**Marx, Karl**

1845 *Theses on Feuerbach*. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>>, accessed 17 September 2015.

**McCutcheon, Russel T.**

2006 ‘It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’ On the Limits of the Humanistic study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves – *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74 (3), 720–50.

2003 *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*. London and New York: Routledge

- 2001 *Critics, not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- 1997 *Manufacturing Religion: the Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**McKinnon, Andrew M.**

- 2002 Sociological Definitions, Language Games, and the 'Essence' of Religion. – *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14 (1), 61–83.

**Olsson, Susanne**

- 2015 *Preaching Islamic Revival: 'Amr Khaled, Mass Media and Social Change in Egypt*. London: IB Tauris.
- 2014 Proselytizing Islam – Problematizing 'Salafism' – *The Muslim World*, 104 (1–2), 171–97.
- 2012 *A hijra Within*. – *Comparative Islamic Studies* 8 (1–2), 71–92.

**Rüpke, Jörg**

- 2011 History – Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religions*, 285–309. London & New York: Routledge.

**Said, E.W.**

- 1978 *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

**Salvatore, Armando**

- 1995 The Rational Authentication of Turath in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muhammad al-Jabiri and Hasan Hanafi. – *Muslim World* 85 (3–4), 191–214.

**Schielke, Samuli**

- 2010 Second Thoughts About the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life. Berlin: Centrum Moderner Orient, Working Papers, No. 2.

**Smith, Jonathan Z.**

- 2004 *Relating Religion: Essays in the study of religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Smith, Wilfred Cantwell**

- 1959 The Comparative Study of Religion: Whither – and Why? – Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa (eds), *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, 31–58. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Spineto, Natale**

- 2009 Comparative Studies in the History of Religions Today: Continuity with the Past and New Approaches. – *Historia Religionum* 1, 41–50.

**Stenberg, Leif**

1996 *The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity*. Lund Studies in History of Religions 6. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

**Taylor, Mark C.**

2004 Defining religion. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51 (11) November 5.

**Waardenburg, Jacques**

2003 *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

**Wiktorowicz, Quintan**

2003 Introduction: Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory. Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed), *Islamic Activism: a Social Movement Theory Approach*, 1–33, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

**Wissenschaftsrat**

2010 Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen. Berlin.



# The humanistic study of religions: An obscure tradition illuminated by the 'Knights of Labor'

STEFAN ARVIDSSON

*Linnæus University*

## Abstract

Today 'humanistic' and 'humanities' are terms rarely used in discussions on methodology and epistemology within the study/history of religions. This article laments this state of affair and reminds the readers of some basic advantages of a humanistic study of religions in comparison to chiefly social scientific approaches to religion and culture. After an initial philosophical argument on the implications of 'humanistic', the article touches upon the significance of historical failures, utopianism, empathy and 'the orectic'. These discussions take place against an analysis of the mythology and ritual life of the 19th century, American, socialist order The Knight of Labor.

Keywords: *humanistic, humanities, methodology, epistemology*

For more than a century 'humanistic', and related words, maintained a central position in the scholarly and cultural life of the Western world. They were used to organise universities, to form the basis of educational policy, and to add force to arguments in cultural discourse. Today, however, these words languish within all sectors of society, including the academic study of religions.<sup>1</sup> Traditional humanistic fields of research and methodologies such as philology, semiotics, iconography, phenomenology, literary analysis, folkloristics, hermeneutics, and even historiographical reflection are losing ground within the study of religions. Instead, at least since the mid-twentieth century, social-scientific perspectives have been emerging as the dominant force and during the last two decades natural-scientific approaches, moreover, have been gaining ground. In this article I wish to remind the reader of what the humanistic study of religions is all about. I will do this with the help of some general philosophical reasoning and with material concerning a secret Christian and socialist fraternity. At the outset I would like to make clear that I consider 'the humanistic study of

---

1 For the Swedish discussion of 'the crisis in the humanities', see Nordin 2008, Ekström & Sörlin 2012, and Forser & Karlsruhn 2013. To a certain extent, the Swedish discussion is a reflection of the Anglo-Saxon debate: see Nussbaum 2010, Small 2013, and Belfiore & Upchurch 2013

religion' to be synonymous with 'the history of religions', except that in this context the former expression better emphasises the aspects that concern the philosophy of science. Consequently, I hope it will be clear that my overall standpoint has very little to do with what historian of religions Russell T. McCutcheon, in a polemical article, has labelled 'the liberal humanistic study of religion (2006, 726)'.

### **The characteristics of the humanities**

What characterises humanistic scholarship? Discussion concerning the features of the humanities can be traced at least to debates around the turn of the twentieth century, when neo-Kantian philosophers set out to determine the difference between natural science and what they called *Geisteswissenschaft*, 'spiritual science' (Persson 1994, p. 164ff). *Geisteswissenschaft* was how the discipline we know today as the humanities was designated, but it was above all, in typical nineteenth century fashion, history/historiography that acted as the prototype for *Geisteswissenschaft*. However, the aim of this article is not to examine the relationship between the natural sciences and the humanities, even if that issue is relevant when the impact of cognitive science and evolutionary theories on the study of religions during the last two decades is considered. Instead, I wish to discuss the relationship between the humanities and the social sciences, which still was an emerging tradition when the neo-Kantians demarcated the principal different scientific/scholarly traditions, but which without doubt would have been considered part of *Geisteswissenschaft*. The similarities between the humanities and the social sciences, which the longstanding appropriation of each other's methods, theories, and concepts demonstrates, are obvious. However, as is more often forgotten, the differences between them are also crucial.

The first step in differentiating the humanities from the social sciences, which I primarily refer to here as disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science, is to demonstrate that the cultural and social dimensions of human life do not entirely overlap. To study humanity as a social being is not quite the same as to study man as a cultural being. The cultural dimension transcends the social, both in terms of what is 'beneath' and what is 'above' the social dimension in a person's life: beneath the social being exists nature, and above, 'spirit', creativity, the 'not-yet-conscious' (Bloch's '*Noch-Nicht-Bewusste*'), and historical change. How does this transcending function? Concerning encounters with nature we should first note, in marked contrast to fashionable social constructivism,

that individuals do have a relationship with nature (including their own body) that is partially independent of social prefigurations. For example, we find no social construction of 'the terrible pain of gallstones'. Nor does there exist a social construction of 'the experience of orgasm', despite the extreme exposure of sexual behaviour in our contemporary culture. Our experiences of the body are indeed moulded by society; however, they are only moulded to a certain extent. In *The Idea of Culture* (2000) the Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton notes that if you give a child a light slap for a misdemeanour the child will certainly cry, whereas you can take part in a robust game and strike the child much harder and they will only laugh happily. Body experience is thus, as social constructivists rightly argue, a social construction. However, if you hit the child really hard they will probably start to cry, even though it was done during a game. Eagleton explains:

Meanings can mould physical responses, but they are constrained by them too. The adrenal glands of the poor are often larger than those of the rich, since the poor suffer more stress, but poverty is not able to create adrenal glands where none exist. Such is the dialectic of nature and culture (Eagleton 2000, 87).

It is not difficult to find similar examples: the fact that we can enjoy the view of wild, magnificent nature depends, of course, on a certain strain of romanticism developed by the victorious bourgeoisie, which, in turn, is linked to certain technological advances, industrialisation, urbanisation, and so on. But the character of the experience of nature – the sensation of cruising down a ski slope on sparkling snow or watching the sunset in the Yosemite valley – cannot be captured through knowledge of these historical developments. Humanistic research must therefore always contain an element of phenomenological description and analysis. A description of an experience alone can certainly never constitute a complete study, but a vivid, detailed, and sensitive description that gives the reader a sense, for example, of what it is to confront nature not as a blasé metropolitan but as a toiling Nepalese farmer, is a *sine qua non* for the humanities.<sup>2</sup> Phenomenol-

---

2 Windelband has a rather extreme view of the nature of the historian's task: 'Für den Historiker besteht die Aufgabe, irgend ein Gebilde der Vergangenheit in seiner ganzen individuellen Ausprägung zu ideeller Gegenwärtigkeit neu zu bleiben. Er hat an Demjenigen was wirklich war, eine ähnliche Aufgabe zu erfüllen, wie der Künstler an Demjenigen was in seiner Phantasie ist. Darin wurzelt die Verwandtschaft des historischen Schaffens mit den ästhetischen, und die der historischen Disziplinen, mit den belles lettres. Hieraus folgt, daß in dem naturwissenschaftlichen Denken die Neigung zur Abstraktion verweigt, in dem historischen dagegen diejenige zur Anschaulichkeit.' (1907, 369) For a study that has carried the thick descriptive virtues to its extreme, see the 1237-page dissertation by Barnekow (2003) on his 'experience of Zen'.

ogy, in this very basic sense, is a method we cannot abandon because of the well-known methodological shortcomings of the past.

Besides encounters with nature and their own bodies human beings engage in activities that should be characterised as asocial. These encompass daydreaming, contemplation and meditation. They can also involve masturbation, murder, or suicide. Admittedly, these phenomena (many of great religious importance in many traditions) do not occur in a social vacuum, but are only rarely the result of social ethics and edicts. They do not favour, at least not directly, the social reproduction of society. It would be stretching the concept 'social' too far to claim, for example, that suicide is a social act.<sup>3</sup>

Another human phenomenon that in no direct way favours social reproduction is art in its broadest sense, an activity that is very much an object of humanistic studies. Of course, poetic representations of heroism, for example, have throughout history served as a means to manipulate the self-image of young men, but art has also transcended the social commandments. Even if art has often been part of the official ideology of its time, it must be emphasised that it is not a cog that easily interlocks with the other wheels of the social machinery. The transcendence of art may relate both to innovative forms and motifs and to its social content. There is certainly a discipline called the sociology of culture that explores the links between society and art, but for humanists it is just as important to study the fact that art, even religious art (for example the unique and innovative baroque paintings of Caravaggio, interlocked as they were with the Counter-Reformation) sometimes transcends the cultural limits of its time. The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre criticised 'vulgar' materialists who reduced art to social class: 'Valéry is a petit bourgeois intellectual, no doubt about it. But not every petit bourgeois intellectual is Valéry (1976, 56).' If human life could be captured in the form of 'social construction', transcendence would be impossible. There are always, however, cracks in society and the ideological apparatus in which change germinates: if those cracks did not exist, historical change would in principle be impossible. It is precisely for this reason that historical studies occupy a crucial role in humanistic research.

---

3 Durkheim's famous analysis of suicide in *Le Suicide* (1897) is the obvious argument for suicide as a 'social fact', but even here one must – in addition to noting the prevalence of suicide as a result of 'asocialisation' (*suicide égoïste* and *suicide anémique*) – emphasise the importance of distinguishing between, on the one hand, the social frameworks and, on the other, the phenomenon itself as well as its logic and consequences. While suicide in general is an effect of social factors, it is rarely (perhaps with martyrs, a kind of *suicide altruiste*, as an exception) in itself a cog in the social machinery.



But the humanities have an even bigger issue than historical change on their agenda. When we no longer confine ourselves to questions about the character of a certain people in a certain historical era, but rather discuss what the ancient Romans have in common with Genghis Khan's Mongols, we reach the core of the humanities: the big question of human nature. (This profound wondering is the reason why philosophy is part of the humanities.) And here, a good distance from the social sciences, the humanities actually meet the natural sciences. It is on the fence that separates the humanities from the natural sciences that the questions of human nature and historical change are perched. This is where we need to be careful of the dialectic between what is essential and general, and what is historically and individually specific. To understand humanity we must – as dialectical materialism once emphasised – at the same time understand both the form of the human being realised in a given society and the potential human being. The sybaritic, cyboric, and computer-bound Westerner of the twenty-first century could not be anticipated by those who observed their struggling and exhausted fellow human beings in the fourteenth, but today we know that such a cultural existence must have had the potential to exist then.

After this general introduction I would like to highlight a number of significant humanistic themes. Of the five themes I will discuss, two or three are commonplace. Out of a growing frustration with students and colleagues who manifest suspicions about the interpretation of cultural phenomena in general, and instead opt for social scientific methods, I believe nevertheless that these are worth being reminded of.

### **A rambling history**

When the neo-Kantian philosophers established the difference between natural science and *Geisteswissenschaft*, they claimed that while natural science searched for regular laws, *Geisteswissenschaft* concerned itself with what is unique and particular. History, according to Wilhelm Windelband in his seminal speech of 1894, involves 'a loving adornment of the specific' (*liebvollen Ausprägung des Besonderen*; 1907, 368). **This statement is both misleading and wise.** It is misleading because scholars within the humanities do use statistical surveys and implement studies of the normal and typical. The members of the Annales School, among others, proved a long time ago the usefulness, indeed indispensability, of statistics and demography in historical research. What is wise about the ideas of Windelband and the neo-Kantians is that they are correct in claiming that – and this is where the

line is drawn between the human and social sciences rather than between natural science and *Geisteswissenschaft* – the humanities have the privilege of caring for the statistically unusual, the unique, the bizarre, and the ingenious. The motivation for this privilege is simply that such phenomena, however socially insignificant they may be, play a part in the history of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Let me exemplify the relevance for the humanities of what is not considered mainstream, or what did not prove to be historically successful, with a short description of an American Christian and, at the same time, socialist fraternity influenced by freemasonry.

In the wake of the American Civil War and in the face of the failures of the first trade unions The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor (abbreviated to the K of L) was secretly inaugurated on 28th December 1869. Outside the circle of oath-bound participants the fraternity was symbolised with five asterisks, ‘\*\*\*\*\*’.<sup>5</sup> The stated purpose was to tame ‘[t]he alarming development and aggressiveness of great capitalists and corporations (in ‘Record’ 1878, 28)’. This purpose was not unique to the K of L, no more than was the idea of fashioning a secret brotherhood. The fact is that the period from the mid-1800s to the 1880s was a period of blossoming secret orders and workers’ friendly societies. Occult rituals, secret handshakes, and ancient mysteries were straws many workers clutched in the wake of the defeat of the first trade unions. What made the K of L unique is therefore not so easy to detect, but it was the first fraternity that welcomed all wage labourers, regardless of skill, gender, or race. Historian Norman J. Ware writes in his pioneering work ‘The Labor Movement in the United States 1860–1895. A Study in Democracy’ (1929):

Emphasis on the principle of solidarity is the beginning of understanding of the Knights of Labor. Strange and grandiose names and titles, rituals, secrecy, forms of organization, even activities, were secondary. The Order tried to teach the American wage-earner that he was a wage-earner first and

---

4 There is, however, a risk – that has often occurred throughout the history of religions – that the hermits, the holy fools, the founders of religion, strange cults and the like, are surrounded by a romantic shimmer and therefore attract too much research at the expense of statistically normal religion. The scholarly community must come to their senses here and balance themselves between spending time and resources on the normal, which may be trivial, and the fascinating, which can be obscure.

5 In the earliest draft of what would become Adelphton Kruptos (*Agenda. In arcana*), written by the first Grand Master Workman, Uriah Stephens, the brotherhood is mentioned as ‘the noble and Holy Order of Peace’ and as ‘A’. The latter seems to be an acronym for ‘archeon’ and probably refers to the Greek word *archeion*, a government building, ‘archive’. In ‘Record of proceedings of the General Assembly of the \*\*\*\*\* held at Reading, Pennsylvania January 1–4 1878’ the brotherhood was encrypted with apparently no less than nine asterisks.

a bricklayer, carpenter, miner, shoemaker, after; that he was a wage-earner first and a Catholic, Protestant, Jew, white, black, Democrat, Republican, after (Ware 1959, xviii).

With time these qualities made the K of L, under the leadership of Terence V. Powderly, 'the first American working-class hero of national stature (Phelan 2000, 1)', grow into an extremely influential organisation for class struggle.

The K of L wanted to fight tyrants and others who danced around the golden calf. They saw themselves embroiled in a holy war: 'We'll fight in this great holy war till we die (quoted in Weir 1996, 117).'<sup>6</sup> Despite the occasionally martial symbolism, the initiated in general cared for a serene and gentle interpretation of knighthood. In his memoirs Powderly recollects that the K of L was occasionally compared to the crusaders. This did not fall on fertile ground: 'I can't think of anything more idiotic than a crusader going to rescue the tomb of One who everywhere throughout the world is filling, not a tomb, but the throbbing hearts and brains of those who love the humanity for which He died (1940, 60).' The knights wanted to be conscientious workers and for their Christianity to be social and socialist. In the words of labour leader and historian George E. McNeill: 'The teachings of the carpenter's Son tend to counteract the bad influences of Mammon (1887, 468).' Their attitude of chivalry is evident in their rituals. In the quotation below, taken from the secret ritual manual *Adelphon Kruptos* ('The Secret Brotherhood'), various officers question whether or not the initiate believes in God, whether s/he has a decent manual job, and is a compassionate human being:

A. U. K. Do you believe in God, the Creator and Universal Father of All?  
Candidate. I do.

A. U. K. Do you obey the Universal Ordinance of God, in gaining your bread by the sweat of your brow?

Candidate. I do.

A. U. K. Are you willing to take a solemn vow binding you to S. O. and M.A.?

---

<sup>6</sup> The K of L, not least its leadership, was imbued by a programmatic tolerant idealism. However, in the broader folk culture surrounding the brotherhood, other emotions could have an outlet – an example (Weir 1996, 136) from a song: 'Half-crazed I wandered round the spot, and just beyond the town I met a dastard Pinkerton and struck the villain down; My brain was frenzied with the thought of children, friends, and wife I set my heel upon his throat and trampled out his life.'

Candidate. I am. [...]

W. A. (or M. W.) Repeat the Great Law of  $\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu\chi\epsilon\iota\upsilon\nu$  [Knighthood].

V. S. I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me. (Commons 1958, 30.)

Although the initiates are ‘knights’, they also call themselves ‘tekton or ‘architekton’ (‘Agenda. In Arcana’, 15). This label is probably a legacy of freemasonry, but ‘tekton’ is originally the Koine Greek for the profession of Jesus’s father, i.e. carpenter. God chose to live as a simple labourer. In contrast to the freemasons, who derive their origin from Hiram, the chief architect of Solomon’s temple, the knights derive theirs from the God who descended to the human world to become a carpenter. In keeping with this heritage, the president of the K of L is, accordingly, called the Grand Master Workman (arche-tekton, or architect). Does this language of knights seem a little ridiculous, a little theatrical? Let us take a glimpse at the experience that lay behind the fraternity’s foundation and struggle. This is how Terence V. Powderly, the Grand Master Worker who made the K of L one of the strongest labour organisations in American history, described his memory of witnessing a workplace accident at a mine in Avondale:

When on that September day at Avondale I saw the blackened, charred bodies of over one hundred men and boys as they were brought to the surface, when I saw a mother kneel in silent grief to hold the cold, still face of her boy to hers, and when I saw her fall lifeless on his dead body, I experienced a sensation that I have never forgotten. It was such a feeling as comes to me whenever I read of death in the mines or on the railroad.

Then when I listened to [union agitator] John Siney I could see Christ in his face and hear a new Sermon on the Mount. I there resolved to do my part, humble though it might be, to improve the condition of those who worked for a living (Powderly 1940, 35).

The sudden decline of the K of L – after the 1890s the fraternity was almost completely a thing of the past – has led historians, such as the acclaimed Marxist Eric Hobsbawm, to see the fraternity as an embarrassment, a rambling diversion, and a story of serious tactical error. In *Primitive Rebels* (1959) the symbolism, honorary titles, and rituals of earlier religious labour organisations appear to Hobsbawm as ridiculous and bizarre (1974, sp. chapter ix). In his attitude toward the world of fraternalism, socialist Christianity,

and Christian Socialism, Hobsbawm is typical of the modern historians who dismiss religious narratives, rituals, and symbolism as irrational flaws.<sup>7</sup>

My brief description of the world of the K of L and the historiographical attitudes towards it aims to indicate several concerns. In the context of late nineteenth century American culture the seemingly bizarre symbolism and rituals of the K of L were in fact far from odd. Many ordinary workers saw fraternalism as a reasonable tool to improve a desperate situation. Thus, something that appears peculiar may be part of a bigger cultural movement, even if it is ignored by historians. This is hardly a new insight, but we should remind ourselves that, for example, esotericism used to be ignored by a more positivist generation of historians and was not taken seriously as a real historical force until the ground-breaking books by Frances Yates showed how esotericism was once a natural part of broader cultural fashions and ways of thinking.<sup>8</sup>

More notably, curiosity about what has been marginalised as 'rambling history' involves a basic methodological insight: the study of the strange, abnormal, and bizarre is quite often a way of showing the commonplace and general in a clearer light. This has been proven by Sigmund Freud's case studies of neurotic individuals, which taught us about normal human psychology, by the study of the Marquis de Sade by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, which highlighted features of the bourgeois mentality, and by Carlo Ginzburg's study of a miller by the name of Menocchio, which shows the boundaries of normal imagination and reasoning in Italy in the sixteenth century. In contrast to a history informed by social science's narrow interests in social formation and hegemony, humanistic research must also take into account the history of intellectual shortcomings, mistaken strategies, and bizarre symbolic action.

---

7 For the negative view of the K of L, see historians mentioned in Weir 1996, 20n3, Gerteis 2007, 24 and Fink 1983, 18f. Ware (1959, 49) is also critical when it comes to the documents of the order: 'It got itself a gorgeous preamble and platform from the Industrial Congress, representing not present and future needs, but past hopes and disappointments.' Kaufman argues (2001, 555–60) that modern, 'secular' unions could 'better represent their interest by pursuing less ornate and more reasonable goals' (557f) and that without being 'committed to quasi-Masonic ritualism' (565). K of L was 'a victim' of fraternalism which had a 'perverse effect on' the labour movement.

8 In the preface to Charles Singer's classic *A Short History of Science to the Nineteenth Century* (1984 [1941]), historian Rolf Lindborg points out that it was typical of Singer's positivist generation to describe the *progress* of science and not 'all of the strange inconsistencies in natural research over the centuries'. The risk of reading history backwards is obvious.

### Interpretation of signs and symbols

In contrast to how the term is used in the evolutionary and cognitive sciences, in the humanities 'culture' should not be limited to achieved and handed-down (non-instinctive) knowledge. Rather, we need always to emphasise the proximity of culture to interpretation. The metal used in car production certainly has a history (a history related to the history of metallurgy, industry, and exploitation, as well as workers' daily work and life); but the physical metal is nevertheless not culture because it cannot be interpreted. The design, colour, and shape of the car on the other hand are open to interpretation. Had it not been for the invention of paper we would have had to do without books, but the paper in itself is not interpreted (even though the qualities of it might, for example, help us to situate it historically), unlike the lines on it that we call writing. The possibility and necessity for interpretation is thus the foundation for the definition of culture in society. In this sense animals do not have culture, even though different monkey groups teach their children to fish for ants in various ways.

The peculiarities of the K of L have nothing to do with the motives of the secret fraternity.<sup>9</sup> We understand those well. The desire of the K of L for a decent life without hunger and worn-out bodies is not peculiar; what we find peculiar is their way of expression, their symbolism, aesthetics, and rhetoric. A study of the K of L must clearly involve study of their specific use of signs, symbols, and words. Let me give a further example from 'Adelphon Kruptos'. This ritual manual occupied a central position in the spiritual life of the Knights (Weir 1996, 49).<sup>10</sup> All lodges used it as the basis of their ritual. Since the foundation of the fraternity in 1869 it seems only a few typed copies of Adelphon Kruptos were circulated, but some time after 1872 a limited number of copies were printed. Editions expanded after 1878, and after 1882 there was a compromise with the hostile Catholic Church, whereby a 'profaned' variant came into use (Weir 1996, 10, 28, 56, 240).

W. A. (or M. W.) Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in...

<sup>9</sup> Engels writes in a letter to F.A. Sorge (29/11 1886) about 'confused principles and ludicrous organisation' of the K of L.

<sup>10</sup> The status of *Adelphon Kruptos* is evident, among other things, from the fact that the debates about changing it went so far that they ran the risk of splitting the K of L (Powderly 1890, 228 f) and that it was translated into, and printed in, French, German, Lithuanian and Polish (Powderly 1940, 66).

Brothers. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory. Selah.

#### VOLUNTARY

The W. A. (or M. W.) shall advance to the center, and facing the Capital shall say:

W A. (or M. W.) Behold the tabernacle of God is with men. (Rev. Xxi. 3.)

Response by all.

Brothers. And he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. (Rev. Xxi. 3.)

Choir and Brothers.

All. Amen.

The W. A. (or M. W.) shall draft or describe the NHWVE LWVD IM CPONXEXIIV [Great seal of Knighthood] at the center, and when done resume his station, give PXHWW HVFL [three raps], form the members of the new Assembly in a chain around the center (the other officers standing at their stations) and say:

W A. (or M. W.) Thus do I imprint the NHWVE LWVD IM CPONXEXIIV [Great seal of Knighthood] on the center of the sanctuary, and thereby dedicate it to the service of God by Serving Humanity. Brothers, look well upon that Sacred Symbol of 'God and Humanity,' and indelibly imprint it upon your memory. Henceforth, while memory lasts, or ever this Globe performs its annual cycles in obedience to the Laws of the Universe, so shall ye perform your obligations. In obedience to the Laws of Universal Brotherhood.

Jubilate – Full Orchestra.(Commons 1957, 28. Ortography is simplified.)

As is well known, the importance of philology and language studies has been a key feature in the humanist project since the Renaissance, and was reinforced during the nineteenth century by the university system that was developed in line with the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Moreover, the perception of the significance of signs and language has considerably

developed in the last hundred years or so: 'language shapes the world', according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure, and their followers. The so-called 'linguistic turn' has come to mean that humanists are less interested in how 'the world shapes language'. I will give one example of this influence, again from *Adelphon Kruptos*.

In the symbolic world of the K of L handed-down Christian mythic images, esoteric symbolism from speculative freemasonry, and even emblematic traditions from the earlier modern era were woven together with the knights' experience of manual wage labour. An exegetical interpretation of the 'Great Seal of Knighthood' might illustrate this. The seal is a complex emblem of overlapping geometric symbols. It bears the motto 'That is the most perfect government in which an injury to one is the concern of all', traditionally attributed to Solon, and has a map of the Americas in its centre. (See Figure 1.)

In Powderly's interpretation of the geometric symbols an extra code is added to the established codes of interpretation, which, in the tradition of speculative freemasonry, involves interpreting symbols as philosophical/theological abstractions such as Creation, Justice, Humanity, Wisdom, etc (1940, 65). This additional code gains its significance by reference to the material and physical dimension of human life. The triangle, for example, is interpreted as a symbol for production, distribution, and consumption, the pentagon as a symbol for the ideal of a five-day workweek, and the hexagon as a symbol for leverage tools, pulleys, wheels and axles, inclined planes, wedges, and screws. Thus, we witness how a 'workerist' class-centred line of decoding garnishes an older, guild-based, and esoteric tradition.

Another example from *Adelphon Kruptos* has, if the neologism is permitted, an ergogenic subject:

In the beginning God ordained that man should labor, not as a curse, but as a blessing; not as a punishment, but as a means of development, physically, mentally, morally, and has set thereunto his seal of approval, in the rich increase and reward. By labor is brought forth the kindly fruits of the earth in rich abundance for our sustenance and comfort; by labor, (not exhaustive) is promoted health of body and strength of mind; and labor garners the priceless stores of wisdom and knowledge. It is the 'Philosopher's Stone,' everything it touches turns to gold. 'Labor is noble and holy'. (from manuscript *Adelphon Kruptos*)



The citation explains that work is 'the Philosopher's Stone', the 'substance' which, as in the tale of King Midas, turns to gold everything with which it comes in contact. Within the chemical tradition of alchemy it is said that 'the Philosopher's Stone' transforms matter into gold or, in the Rosicrucian tradition of alchemy, ennobles the soul. For hundreds of years alchemists have searched for the substance that will enable this transmutation to happen. The socialist play in *Adelphon Kruptos* with the codes of alchemy is cunning in its simplicity: 'The Philosopher's Stone', 'The Red Lion' is the work in itself. The *magnum opus* is the *prima materia*.

### The orectic

In his 1970 work *Sul materialismo* the Italian philologist, Marxist, and critic of Freud's method of interpretation, Sebastiano Timpanaro, pioneered the questioning of structuralism and warned against the humanities' idealistic tendencies. Timpanaro held that there were inclinations that tended to identify something that is in many respects peculiar to humans, specifically the use of signs and language, as the essence of humanity. It is as if one were to say that the trunk is the essence of the elephant simply because it is typical of that species: 'to reduce man to what is specific about him with respect to other animals, is just as one-sided as to reduce him (as vulgar materialists do) to what he has in common with them (1980, 16)'.

Signs and language are of course essential when humanists interpret the human consciousness of life consciousness, but they should not be overestimated in terms of what is essential in human existence. That which is particular for humankind (the ability to symbolise our 'inner world' and our involvement in advanced communication) should not be identified with what is essential. For Timpanaro this is an argument in favour of a Marxist perspective, that is, the way to understand culture is by focusing initially on human need and the material conditions for satisfying them. The argument might be developed in a more sociological approach in studying the economic and social preconditions of culture and religion, or it might move towards a stronger focus on the sensual and corporeal aspects of human life. Here we will focus on the latter.

The humanities indeed entail the risk of a one-sided emphasis on the intellectual, conceptual, or cognitive dimension of human life at the expense of the sensual and corporeal. The rhetorical power of religious symbolism, whether in narrative or image, and their ability to persuade and inspire is not merely a matter of their intellectual content. Religious and ideological

symbols are intimately connected with and refer to feelings, desires and bodily constitutions and processes. The scholarly tradition that has most forcefully highlighted this is psychoanalysis, which currently languishes as a discipline of the humanities. It has always been met with overwhelming scepticism by the discipline of the history of religions, often – undeniably – for good reasons.<sup>11</sup> The emancipatory and critical goals of psychoanalysis, as well as its outlook on bodily signs as symptoms and subconscious desires, have been nurtured elsewhere, not least by the Frankfurt School. In studies by researchers such as Herbert Marcuse, Julia Kristeva, and Klaus Theweleit, the ‘non-cognitivist’ approach of psychoanalysis has indeed proven fruitful.<sup>12</sup> The interest today’s humanities has in corporality – and to a lesser degree in emotions and sensuality – is instead dominated by a one-sided postmodern emphasis on ‘the construction of’ the body. Even if this tradition, founded by pioneers such as Michael Jackson and Judith Butler, once emerged out of materialistic praxis philosophy, it has since developed into a thoroughly idealistic understanding of culture.

The psychoanalytic movement has had very limited influence on the history of religions. It may be presumed to have had some bearing on a study many contemporary scholars of religions regard as a model for the interpretation of symbols, however: the anthropologist Victor Turner’s classic analysis of the *mudyi* tree in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of the Ndembu Ritual* (1967).<sup>13</sup> According to Turner, the symbolism of the Ndembu people encompasses an opposition between, on the one hand, an ideological or normative dimension and, on the other, a sensory or ‘orectic’ dimension. What this means is that Ndembu symbols refer to social laws and morality and at the same time to the individual’s sensuality and corporeality, and create a nexus between these two dimensions. I will give an example of the simultaneous ideological and orectic dimension from *Adelphon Kruptos* in which an initiation ritual is prescribed:

The U. K. [Unknown Knight] places the candidate and the friends at the center: places their left hands on the Sacred Scriptures, fingers over, thumb under: directs the candidate to grasp the \* of his friend, the friend that of the

---

11 Alfred L. Kroeber’s devastating criticism of *Totem und Tabu* was already published in 1920 (re-printed in Lessa & Vogt 1979).

12 I am thinking of general approaches such as Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), empirical studies such as Klaus Theweleit’s *Männerphantasien* (1977, 1978) and innovative concepts such as Julia Kristeva’s distinction between ‘the symbolic’ and ‘the semiotic’.

13 For Freud’s unacknowledged influence on Turner, see Oring 2009.

U. K., and the U. K. takes that of the candidate, the three forming a triangle over and around the Altar, and all pronounce the Vow. (*Adelphon Kruptos*.)

When I first read this passage I was puzzled. I had previously understood that the authors of the manual replaced the name of the fraternity with nine asterisks, but in this passage it seemed that an asterisk had replaced an everyday word. In a later version it had been 'profaned' so as to pacify criticism from the Roman Catholic Church; likewise in a French version this passage is replaced by the straightforward 'place the left hand on the heart and raise the right hand' (*Knights of Labor Illustrated*, 10), respectively '*lui fait lever la main droite et placer la main gauche sur le coeur*' (*Adelphon Kruptos*, French version, 8.). This suggests that '\*' should be read as 'heart'. However, the English verb 'grasp' in the quotation seems to disqualify this interpretation. You cannot 'grasp something' if your hand is placed on your heart (chest). Some other decryption is therefore needed.

Elsewhere in the text we can see that '\*' replaces important key terms such as 'Knight', 'Knighthood', and 'Labor'. Similarly, it is used when the Knights wish to avoid printing secret signs and passwords. In connection with the mention of a secret handshake we come closer to solving what '\*' signifies in our quotation. In the older, 'sacral' version of *Adelphon Kruptos* we find the following description and comment: 'As the \* distinguishes man from all other orders of creation, and by it alone man is able to achieve wonders of art and perform labor; we always, therefore, approach a brother in this way, and by so doing, recognize the wisdom of the Great Master.' (*Adelphon kruptos*, 19.) What the Knights grasp during the solemn initiation ceremony when new members are sworn into the brother- and sisterhood of the order, is thus the thumb. The thumb, which, according to the comment, is unique to humans and has made it possible for human beings, through work, craft, and art, to hold a unique position in creation. It seems to me a worthy 'orectic' reference for a group consisting of manual (from Latin *manus*, 'hand') workers. Having decoded the thumb, I became aware of the symbolic significance of the hand: for example, the recurring mention of 'clean hands'. I suppose this symbolism should not have surprised me, but until this point I had failed to spot it. Prior to this discovery I had not even reflected upon the fact that the K of L's most frequently used motto, S.O.M.A., which stands for 'Secrecy, Obedience, and Mutual Assistance', is obviously an allusion to the Greek word *soma*, 'body'.

Why has it been difficult for historians of religions to take the orectic referent of symbolism into account? Perhaps it is because previous analy-

sis of symbolism and religious discourse has been based too much on familiarity with secular ideologies. These generally present themselves as reasonable discourses informed by intelligent ideas – discourses that, *nota bene*, exclude straightforward solutions of health and existential problems. Liberalism, as the prime example here, offers the prospect of political and economic freedom, but does not have a cure for cancer, nor does it offer a vindication for the death of a dear sibling. The vigour of religions consists, however – and this is quite possibly also true of, to use John E. Smith's (1994) expression, 'quasi-religious' ideologies such as fascism – in the ability to merge the overall political issues of power and social order with the concrete existential and health-and body-related experiences, and thus to intertwine the ideological with the oretic.

In complex and chaotic material details enable us to see deeper connections. In his famous article 'Clues: roots of an evidential paradigm' (1989), historian Carlo Ginzburg compares three paths of knowledge from the late nineteenth century. Based on descriptions of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Giovanni Morelli's method for the identification of art forgery, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic writings Ginzburg argues for the existence of a specific 'code-deciphering paradigm'. Ginzburg suggests that this scholarly paradigm is characterised by a hermeneutical focus on 'privileged zones' (1989, 123). For the detective it involves locating and identifying clues to catch criminals. For the psychoanalyst it involves being alert to unconscious symptoms and dream symbolism to lay bare the structure of the patient's desires. For the art connoisseur who wants to identify the artist behind a painting it involves studying unconsciously but habitually painted details – and not to concentrate on, for example, conscious choices of motif. The methodological interest in detail – such as '\*' for 'thumb' – is yet another feature that distinguishes the humanities from the social sciences.

### **The utopian dimension**

The founders of sociology (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) primarily understood religion as an ideological discourse (see e.g. Turner 1994). Ideology was perceived as attitudes, values, and convictions that mobilised forces to consolidate and legitimise the social status of certain groups in a given society. The culture of the K of L contained ideological elements in this sense, among others in the form of myths, which, as Bruce Lincoln has suggested, can be seen as 'ideology in narrative form' (1999, 147). Here is an example from *Adelphon Kruptos*:

In the beginning the great Architect formed the Universe; The governing principle of which is Immutable Justice. In its Beautiful proportions is displayed Omniscient Wisdom; And sealed His work with the signet of Everlasting Truth; Teaching, that everything of value, or merit, is the result of creative Industry; And the cooperation of its harmonious parts evermore inculcates perfect Economy (Agenda: In arcana).

In myths – as in this fragment – the task is not only, as in secular, political ideologies, to make attitudes, values, and convictions appear natural, evident, and irrefutable; it is bolder still. Attitudes, values, and convictions should be seen as elements of a divine order. It is not only wage-earners, the quotation suggests, who long for justice and cooperation, and who believe that strenuous work is the true basis of economic value. It is God who has arranged it like this.

For the heirs of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber within the history of religions it is often assumed that the privileged discourse of the elite is ideological, while protest movements and movements of resistance, particularly millenarian movements, are utopian.<sup>14</sup> As a protest movement against the hegemony of ‘the kings of capital’ the world of the Knights of Labor ought thus to show a glimmer of utopian illumination. And such is the case. Here is an example from one of their songs:

Work, Brothers mine;  
 work, hand and brain;  
 We'll win the Golden Age again;  
 And Love's Millennial morn shall rise  
 In happy hearts and blessed eyes.  
 Hurrah! Hurrah!  
 True Knights are we  
 In Labor's lordlier chivalry (Weir 1996, 110).

The utopia of the K of L was a world of work liberated from brutal coercion. It is the dream of work where labour is meaningful and where the fruits of it belong to those who conduct it. They do not dream about *le droit à la paresse*, ‘the right to be lazy’, to use the title of a book published in 1883 by the French socialist Paul Lafargue, which, by the way, was one of the most popular books among workers around the turn of the century.

---

14 For a somewhat longer discussion of this, see Arvidsson 2013.

Let us take a step back, however. The constellation that the upper classes relate to the lower classes as ideology relates to utopia is not self-evident. Sociologist Karl Mannheim, philosopher Ernst Bloch, and contemporary literary theorist Frederic Jameson argue for a somewhat different case.<sup>15</sup> According to Jameson the interpreter of a work of art or discourse might use two distinctive pairs of hermeneutical spectacles (1981, 291f et passim). 'Negative hermeneutics' pays attention to the 'instrumentality' of an artefact, that is, to how it intervenes in ongoing social and political conflicts. 'Positive hermeneutics', by contrast, look for the utopian dimension. In the same artefact – Jameson is speaking here primarily about modern literature – ideological and utopian elements appear intertwined, involving the entanglement of two distinct sensory modes and modes of time consciousness: on the one hand the consolidation, stabilisation, support, and mobilisation of ideology, on the other the anticipation, dreaming, demanding, and open-heartedness of utopia. It is therefore methodologically essential not only to reveal the ideological-instrumental aspects of utopias, but also to search for the utopian aspects of evidently ideological narratives.

The K of L was part of the widespread interest in fraternalism during America's Gilded Age. At its core lay ideological aspirations. Fraternalism strengthened and supported a sense of community. But it was at the same time designed to bring about a utopian imagination, and even to provide the seed for the fulfilment of this utopia. In the manifesto, texts, and activities of the K of L we thus find an intertwining of ideology and utopianism. One moment the struggle involves the battle for 'bread and butter' and the fight for union-friendly labels on commodities, and the next it involves the millenarian fight for 'the Commune of Christ' (Halker 1991, 268), a term which alludes both to the most fundamental ritual of the Christian community, the communion, and the Paris Commune, the world's first socialist experiment. A photograph taken at the National General Assembly in Richmond in 1886 may illustrate the fusion. (See Figure 2.) We can examine the photograph for ideological signs, i.e. the traits of what today would be called empowerment. The women form their own influential group within the order. They are properly dressed and display no bohemian manners. The oldest woman is naturally seated in the centre of the photograph. At the same time the picture is utopian in the sense that it depicts women as full delegates in a universal brotherhood (*fraternité*). Moreover, they have

---

15 For utopian or, to use Fredric Jameson's terminology (2010, 434), 'utopological' themes within Marxism, see Geoghegan 2008.

brought a baby with them. The unwritten future knows no better symbol.<sup>16</sup> Politologist Vincent Geoghegan (2008, 16) believes that it is typical that ‘a utopia asks the most awkward, the most embarrassing questions’, and the presence of the baby in the solemn assembly precisely does this.

The actual changes in culture through the centuries raise questions about human nature and history. They also raise questions about matters never realised: dreams, utopias, hopes, and longings are indeed objects for humanistic inquiry. Ideas that never materialised, or that were realised but soon thwarted, or ideas that barely influenced the course of history at all are all important for the humanistic interest in knowledge. These dreams and ideas were by their nature embedded in social contexts, and in many ways they mirrored the shortcomings that existed in society at a given moment. But, as with art, at the same time they imply something beyond social reproduction. From the renaissance humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to Jean-Paul Sartre and Ernst Bloch, human nature has been described as the free capacity to envision the non-existent: man is the Being that brings Nothing into the world. This fundamental insight opens up the relevance of the study of marginal phenomena as well as yet to be realised fantasies for the humanities.

### Empathy

The baby in the photograph brings us to the last theme I wish to address concerning the humanistic study of religions: questions regarding the usefulness for humanistic exploration of empathy, and information about subjective intentions and meanings. These questions are among the most controversial in the humanities because they smack of arbitrariness, speculation, and misdirected benevolence towards religious and cultural phenomena. Like nearly everyone, I am confident in the methodological advantages of the natural sciences and I am not a stranger to the ideal of a unity of science (*Einheitswissenschaft*). I believe that scholars of the humanities cannot, in a phenomenological fashion, place the statements of the alleged effects of magical powers or divine intervention ‘in brackets’ when scientists have refuted these hypotheses. At the same time I have no doubt that human history and culture constitute a qualitative leap – a leap that blocks reductionist biologism. Alongside all long-established arguments

---

16 Compare expressions such as ‘the society was pregnant with’, which Frederic Jameson has made some remarks about in *Valences of the dialectic* (2010) in connection with a discussion on socialist utopianism.

against this kind of reductionism, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins recently highlighted the fact that culture (defined broadly as acquired, as opposed to instinctual, behaviours) is thousands of years older than the birth of anatomically modern man: 'Culture is older than *Homo sapiens* (2008, 104).<sup>17</sup> This means that humankind has from the outset been determined by culture and that, consequently, culture is human nature: 'The critical point is that for some three million years humans evolved biologically under cultural selection. We have been fashioned body and soul for a cultural existence (2008, 104).<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding how Sahlins's argument will be received, the earlier critiques of biologism (from neo-Kantians via phenomenology, critical theory, and hermeneutics to social constructivism) stand. The devastating critique of biologism should not, however, be seen as *carte blanche* for methodological sloppiness, personal opinions, and unfounded speculations. For how can we really be sure if the method of the humanities is based partly on empathy and methodological identification with the human objects under investigation?

A tool for knowledge empathy requires, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has emphasised, a human-specific historical community (2010, 296–311, 352–367). When scholars study different persons through history and across cultures they inevitably discover similarities between their own attitudes, values, and convictions and those of the people they are studying. If they do not discover these similarities, they have simply failed to accumulate any real knowledge. They have not dug deeply enough. No real understanding has taken place – a die-hard hermeneutic scholar would argue – as long as the difference between people as a subject of knowledge and as an object of knowledge is insurmountable. This claim surely places great demands on the scholar. It requires advanced studies in history, language, and culture, as no individual can turn every single experience we have into something very useful, namely the cumulated corpuses of humanistic literature. We should also consult art, literature, and other forms of expression. Real knowledge of our fellow human beings, as opposed to, for example, statistics, means that, with the help of our ability to feel empathy, we can approach 'their

---

17 It comes as no surprise that the question of whether we can accept the claim that culture is older than the anatomically modern human involves the definition of culture. Sahlins leans towards Richard G. Klein's research, which means, if I understand it correctly, that culture is defined as 'information acquired from conspecifics through learning or imitation' (Klein 2008).

18 It is thought-provoking to contrast this claim with – or is it rather to develop a parallel? – cultural theorist Terry Eagleton's assertion that culture *cannot* be said to be true human nature, but is a addition to nature: 'It is not that culture is our nature, but that it is *of* our nature, which makes our life difficult.' (2000, 99.)



truth', that is, their basic needs and longings. None of this is different just because we study people who harbour anti-humanistic beliefs, for example, ancient Gnostics or antiziganist Europeans. We still have to approach their 'truth' (for example, their struggle for integrity and dignity in a chaotically changing world). To note similarities and recognise human traits involves, as historian of ideas Quentin Skinner has reminded us, understanding the intent behind any given cultural expression (see discussions in Skinner 1988).

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has famously argued that there are three 'knowledge interests' (*Erkenntnisinteresse*) within science. Apart from the technical and practical knowledge interests, in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1978) Habermas argues for the existence of an emancipatory knowledge interest. The prime example of this knowledge interest is psychoanalysis. Habermas's exploration has been influential, even if not within the history of religions. For my taste, however, the term 'emancipatory' sounds a little too idealistic, or akin to self-help books. Instead, I believe it is better to describe the knowledge interest behind the humanities as something like the aim to help people create a culture that makes them feel 'at home in the world'. The metaphor surrounding 'home', examined by among others the anthropologist Michael Jackson (1995, see also Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974), seems to me to be closer to the heart of the humanities: to study human history is to study instinctive feelings of belonging and feelings of its opposite, alienation.

Thus, my position involves a methodical search for the forces that have conducted what the historian Carlo Ginzburg describes as 'taking note of a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims' (2013, xxvi). The humanistic study of religions must uncover the forces that have made the dreams of feeling at home in the world go unfulfilled for most of the people who have walked the earth over the past three thousand years.<sup>19</sup> This does not involve chasing villains. Humanists are neither policemen nor prosecutors. However, if history did not contain villains, if all suffering was natural (as Nietzsche would have it), what need would there be for historical knowledge? In contrast to postmodernists, with their focus on various hidden agendas behind the search for knowledge, I am not averse to the idea that people at least sometimes study history for the same reason they play with their dogs or bake a cake: because it is fun

---

19 In the daring *Sedna oder Die Liebe zum Leben* (1984) anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr dates alienation and the rise of ideologues that deny life all value ('the ideology of escapism') or stimulate a longing for an afterlife ('transcendence ideology') to the beginning of the first millennium B.C.

and enjoyable. Not all searches for knowledge are a manifestation of a 'will to power'. But academic historiography must, nevertheless, be more than a pastime or a kind of elevated meditation on human nature and destiny. Historiography— and this is where such diverse philosophers of history as Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin meet – should be conducted to fill us with awe, to make us proud or angry (Nietzsche 1980; Benjamin 1974, 691–706). We must therefore look for the forces that have generated alienation.

The search for alienating, anti-humanist forces is not a search for individual villains, but for structural errors. As has already been said, humanists are neither policemen nor prosecutors; and nor are they sensationalist reporters. It is more important to highlight slow hopeless suffering than the spectacular.<sup>20</sup> In the working class poetry that developed around the K of L, we quite frequently find this particular assessment of the importance of focusing on this everyday, almost invisible, suffering:

In a dim-lighted chamber a dying maiden lay,  
 The tide of her pulses was ebbing fast away;  
 In the flush of her youth she was worn with toil and care  
 And starvation showed its traces on the features once so fair.  
 No more the work-bell calls the weary one.  
 Rest, tired wage-slave, in your grave unknown;  
 Your feet will no more tread life's thorny, rugged way,  
 They've murdered you by inches upon thirty cents a day (Weir 1996, 124)!

---

20 The American writer Mark Twain expresses this attitude in a fiery passage in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889, 157): 'Why, it was like reading about France and the French, before the ever memorable and blessed Revolution, which swept a thousand years of such villainy away in one swift tidal-wave of blood – one: a settlement of that hoary debt in the proportion of half a drop of blood for each hogshead of it that had been pressed by slow tortures out of that people in the weary stretch of ten centuries of wrong and shame and misery the like of which was not to be mated but in hell. There were two 'Reigns of Terror', if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? What is swift death by lightning compared with death by slow fire at the stake? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror – that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.'

And Walter Benjamin wrote the following justly famous and memorable lines, which are also inscribed on the memorial stone at his grave:

‘It is a more difficult task to honour the memory of the nameless than the famous. Historiography is dedicated to the memory of the nameless.’<sup>21</sup>

Scholarly disciplines are ultimately defined, I would argue, by a given situation of query. The query situation of archaeology, for example, is often made up of concrete, material remains: ‘What is this?!’ I would like to suggest that the query situation for the humanistic study of religions should be described as the feeling of surprise at what Karl Marx, in a famous passage in the introduction to *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, called the ‘imaginary flowers [that sprout] on the chain’ (*die imaginären Blumen an der Kette*; 1964, 379). It is the sense of surprise at the existence of religious and quasi-religious fantasies and accompanying ceremonies and institutions that seems to be designed to ease the sense of homelessness in the world that has been widely felt by the overwhelming majority of the world’s population for, if we have interpreted the signs correctly, at least three thousand years. I understand the history of religions to be a core discipline within the humanities, not only because almost all culture throughout history has been religious culture, but because the discipline focuses not only on what has been realised through history, but also on fantasies – fantasies born out of real needs, out of feelings of vulnerability and anticipation.

\* \* \*

Stefan Arvidsson is Professor in the History of Religions at the School of Cultural Sciences, Linnæus university, Sweden. E-mail: stefan.arvidsson@lnus.se

---

21 ‘Schwerer ist es, das Gedächtnis der Namenlosen zu ehren als das der Berühmten. Dem Gedächtnis der Namenlosen ist die historische Konstruktion geweiht (Benjamin 1974,1241).’ For an argument in the same spirit, see Hobsbawm 1999,12.

*Bibliography**Primary sources**Adelphon Kruptos*

Typewritten version that, according to the handwriting on the cover page, belonged to Terence V. Powderly. The original can be found in 'The Papers of Terence V. Powderly' at Catholic University (Washington, D.C.). Copy in the author's possession. Incomplete digitized version on Catholic University of America <<http://cuomeka.wrlc.org/exhibits/show/knights/kol-docs/kol-doc-2>>, accessed 18 Mars 2015.

*Adelphon Kruptos. Cette publication renferme les règles qui gouvernent les séances des Chevaliers du travail au Canada.*

1886 French translation of *Knights of Labor illustrated*. Digitized on <[http://openlibrary.org/books/OL24636670M/Adelphon\\_Kruptos](http://openlibrary.org/books/OL24636670M/Adelphon_Kruptos)>, accessed 14 April 2015.

*Agenda. In arcana*

Handwritten and commented text in notepad, probably from 1869. Author is presumably Uriah Smith Stephens. Original can be found in 'The Papers of Terence V. Powderly' at Catholic University (Washington, D.C.). Copy in author's possession.

**Commons, John R. (ed.)**

1958 *A documentary history of American industrial society*. Vol. 10, Labor movement: [1860–1880], New York.

*Knights of Labor illustrated: 'Adelphon kruptos,' the full, illustrated ritual including the 'Unwritten work' and an historical sketch of the order*

1886 Chicago, Ezra A. Cook, 1886. From collections at International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

*Record of proceedings of the General Assembly of the \*\*\*\*\* held at Reading*

1878 *Internet Archive* <<http://www.archive.org/details/RecordOfProceedingsOfTheGeneralAssemblyOfTheKnightsOfLabor>>, accessed 14 April 2015.

**Powderly, Terence V.**

1940 *The Path I Trod. The Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*. Edited by Harry J. Carman, Henry David och Paul N. Guthire. New York. Columbia University Press

*Literature***Arvidsson, Stefan**

2013 Review of Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions (Bruce Lincoln, 2012) – *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 25 (1), 168–77, 213.

**Barnekow, Sten**

2003 *Erfarenheter av zen*. Dissertation. Lunds universitet: Nya Doxa.

**Belfiore, Eleonora & Anna Upchurch (eds)**

2013 *Humanities in the twenty-first century: beyond utility and markets*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan

**Benjamin, Walter**

1974 *Gesammelte Schriften*. Bd 1. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

**Berger, Peter L., Brigitte Berger & Hansfried Kellner**

1974 *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Vintage Books.

**Dawson, Lorne L.**

1988 *Reason, Freedom, and Religion: Closing the Gap between the Humanistic and Scientific Study of Religion*. New York: Lang.

**Duerr, Hans Peter**

1984 *Sedna oder Die Liebe zum Leben*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

**Durkheim, Émile**

2006 (1897) *On suicide*. Translated by Robin Buss. London: Penguin

**Eagleton, Terry**

2000 *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Ekström, Anders & Sverker Sörlin**

2012 *Alltings mått: humanistisk kunskap i framtidens samhälle*. Stockholm: Norstedt.

**Engels, Frederick**

1886 Letter to F.A. Sorge 29/11. – *Marxist Internet Archive*. <[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/letters/86\\_11\\_29.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/letters/86_11_29.htm)>, accessed 16 April 2015.

**Fink, Leon**

1983 *Workingmen's democracy: the Knights of Labor and American politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

**Forser, Tomas & Thomas Karlsohn (eds)**

2013 *Till vilken nytta? En bok om humanioras möjligheter*. Göteborg: Daidalos.

**Gadamer, Hans-Georg**

2010 *Hermeneutik. 1, Wahrheit und Methode : Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. 7th edition. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

**Geoghegan, Vincent**

2008 *Utopianism and Marxism*. London: Methuen.

**Gerteis, Joseph**

2007 *Class and color line. Interracial class coalition and the Knight of Labor and the Populist Movement*. Durham. Duke University Press.

**Ginzburg, Carlo**

2013 *The cheese and the worms: the cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller*. Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

1989 *Clues, myths, and the historical method*. Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Habermas, Jürgen**

1978 *Knowledge and Human Interests*. 2nd edition. London: Heinemann

**Halker, Clark**

1991 Jesus was a carpenter. Labor song-poets, labor protest, and true religion in gilded age America. – *Labor History*, 32 (2): 273–289.

**Hobsbawm, Eric J.**

1974 [1959] *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

1999 *On history*. London: Abacus.

**Holbrook, Clyde Amos**

1963 *Religion, a Humanistic Field*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

**Jackson, Michael**

1995 *At Home in the World*. Durham: Duke University Press.

**Jameson, Fredric**

1981 The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P.

2010 *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso.

**Kaufman, Jason**

2001 Rise and Fall of a Nation of Joiners: The Knights of Labor Revisited, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (4), 553–579.

**Klein, Richard G.**

2009 Culture, population structure, and low genetic diversity in Pleistocene hominins. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 106 (1), 33–37. [or 2008?]

**Lessa, William A. & Evon Z. Vogt (eds)**

1979 *Reader in Comparative Religion: an Anthropological Approach*. 4th edition. New York: Harper & Row.

**Lincoln, Bruce**

1999 *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

**Lindborg, Rolf**

1984 Introduction – Charles Singer, *Naturvetenskapens historia*. Lund: Liber-Läromedel.

**Marcuse, Herbert**

1955 *Eros and civilization: a philosophical inquiry into Freud*. New York: Vintage.

**McCutcheon, Russell T.**

2006 'It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It! It's a Sin!': On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves. – *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74 (3) , 720–750.

**McNeill, George E. et al.**

1887 *History of the Knights of Labor*. Written with help from with Cook, William, J. M. Hilsee, R. W. Keen, J. S. Kennedy, R. C. Macauley & James L. Wright. – McNeill, George E. (ed.) *The Labor movement*. Chapter Boston: A. M. Bridgman

**Moi, Toril**

2006 *Henrik Ibsen and the birth of modernism: art, theatre, philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Nietzsche, Friedrich**

1980 *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

**Nordin, Svante**

2008 *Humaniora i Sverige: framväxt, guldålder, kris*. Stockholm: Atlantis.

**Nussbaum, Martha Craven**

2010 *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

**Oring, Elliot**

1993 Victor Turner, Sigmund Freud, and the return of the Repressed. – *Ethos*, 21 (3), 273–294.

**Persson, Mats**

1994 *Förnufts Kampen: Vitalis Norström och idealismens kris*. Stockholm: B. Östlings bokförl. Symposion.

**Phelan, Craig**

2000 *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

**Powderly, Terence V.**

1890 *Thirty Years of Labor. 1859–1889*. Columbus: Excelsior.

**Sahlins, Marshall David**

2008 *The Western Illusion of Human Nature: With Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy, Equality and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the West, and Comparative Notes on Other Conceptions of the Human Condition*. Chicago, Ill.: Prickly Paradigm.

**Sartre, Jean-Paul**

1976 *Critique of dialectical reason. 1, Theory of practical ensembles*. London: NLB.

**Skinner, Quentin**

1988 *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Cambridge: Polity.

**Small, Helen**

2013 *The value of the humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Smith, John E.**

1994 *Quasi-religions: Humanism, Marxism and Nationalism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

**Theweleit, Klaus**

1977-1978 *Männerphantasien*. Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern.

**Timpanaro, Sebastiano**

1980 *On materialism*. London: Verso. [1970?]

**Turner, Bryan S.**

1994 *Religion and Social Theory*. London: Sage.

**Turner, Victor W.**

1967 *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University press.

**Twain, Mark**

1889 *A Connecticut yankee in king Arthur's court*. New York & London: Chatto & Windus.



**Ware, Norman J.**

1929 *The Labor Movement in the United States 1860–1895. A Study in Democracy.* New York and London: D. Appleton and Company.

**Weir, Robert E.**

1996 *Beyond labor's veil: the culture of the Knights of Labor.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

**Windelband, Wilhelm**

1907 *Präludien.* Tübingen: Mohr Verlag.

**Appendix.**

**Figure 1.** The Great Seal of Knighthood, symbol of the K of L. Reprinted from Powderly 1940, 440.



**Figure 2.** Delegates to the National General Assembly in Richmond in 1886. Photograph by Terence V. Powderly from Terence Vincent Powderly Photographic Collections, The Catholic University of America.



# A guest at the table of the gods: Religion and the origins of academic life<sup>1</sup>

PETER JACKSON

*Stockholm University*

## Abstract

Proceeding from the Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, this paper is an attempt to survey the historical premises of the academic study of religion, both as a practice of detaching the subject matter of religion from its institutional restrictions, and as a practice of rehearsing certain modalities of thought and action (philosophical as well as religious) flourishing in the ancient world long before Christianity conquered the sphere of public worship in the fourth century. By paying particular attention to themes of suspension and commensality in religious practice and discourse, an attempt is made to reconsider the critical task of the history of religions, famously devised by Bruce Lincoln as a reversal of the orientation of religious discourse.

*Keywords: Pico della Mirandola, Bruce Lincoln, cultic meals, Pythagoreanism, early Christianity, Sabians in Harran*

Who would not desire, putting all human concerns behind him, holding the goods of fortune in contempt and little minding the goods of the body, thus to become, while still a denizen of earth, a guest at the table of the gods, and, drunk with the nectar of eternity, receive, while still a mortal, the gift of immortality? (Pico della Mirandola 1956 [1486], 26.)

This quotation from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, a statement of early humanism by an influential representative of the Italian Renaissance, brings us into the midst of things. If we are to make some historical sense of today's event, Pico's oration is the proper starting point. It is a point from which we may look back, in recognition of Pico's plea for a detached intellectual vision, on several centuries of scholastic learning in a Europe dominated by Christian doctrine and papal censorship. It is also

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper read at a conference on the current status of the history of religions in Sweden, hosted by the The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, on 20 February 2014. Hence the reference to 'today's event' and 'a cause for academic self-examination' in the paragraphs to follow.

a point from which we may look forward, infused by the spirit of the first privately sponsored academies, towards our own academic endeavours. Furthermore, the sense of occupying a middle ground at the intersection of two worlds can be extended from Pico's own historical situation to the position of human beings in his anthropocentric cosmology.

While still insisting that he was a devout Christian, the young Renaissance philosopher had embarked on an ambitious intellectual quest, spending seven years at Italian and French universities, immersed in the study of philosophical and theological literature from a variety of pre- and non-Christian traditions, evoking the names of ancient sages (Zoroaster, Moses, Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistos), and desiring to reveal the ultimate mysteries through immediate vision (*epopteía*). According to his eclectic interpretation, the human is a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, capable of transforming her or himself, and placed by God at the centre of creation:

[i]f vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. (Pico della Mirandola 1956 [1486], 8f.)

Pico's notion of apotheosis as the reward for intellectual aspiration was not a mainstay of Christian doctrine in the fifteenth century. On the contrary, Paul and the Latin Church Fathers had developed a doctrine of faith which placed less emphasis on certain searching modes of cognizance, especially those of *gnōsis* and *curiositas*, as reliable paths to divine truth. He imagines the intellectual as a guest at the table of the gods; no longer as a miserable creature doomed to fear and reverence, but as someone worthy of dignity. The commensal imagery was not an accident of classicising fancy. If anything, it deserves consideration for our current purpose of debate less as a historical subject matter in its own right than as a cause for academic self-examination. How did we become what we are? How did we develop into the kinds of secular academics that we imagine ourselves to be when we are *studying* religion? In tracing the early history of academic life, I shall point to a set of ritual features and strategies that were not merely superficially linked to this way of living, but in fact strongly informed it. Before turning to this daunting task, however, let me give you a few examples of what I consider typical expressions of dissent within the contemporary field of religious studies.

### Irreligious credentials

Even the most casual visitor to a conference arranged by the IAHR or one of its member associations will perceive the tensions between loosely assembled scholarly camps. For the sake of clarity, let us think of them as teams of players involved in a prestigious game. There are rules of the game regulating general principles of conduct, but there are also styles and tactics distinguishing each team from the other, one player from another within each team, and solitary players from those associated with specific teams. Apart from a constant disagreement about preferred tactics, some players immediately disqualify themselves by breaking the general rules, either because they blatantly misinterpret the rules of the game, or because they admit that they play according to the rules of another game (i.e. religion) whose examination defines the purpose of the current game. Dogmatic theologians appear, not altogether surprisingly, as prototypes of the latter. It was in invoking this conflict of interest that the French Ministry of Education once justified its replacement of the Catholic Theological Faculties with the Fifth Section of Religious Sciences: '[W]e do not wish to see the cultivation of polemics but of critical research, we wish to see the examination of texts and not the discussion of dogma.'<sup>2</sup> Such statements of emancipation from the local sanctions of a particular religious tradition set a precedent for the current game. They forbid us to employ, for example, Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani generis* as a dictate rather than an arbitrary datum of study.

Nevertheless, the players do not find the means and ends of sidestepping dogmatic exclusivism congenial. Where some identify a genuine transcendent concern beyond the historical contingencies, others tend to historicise the mundane excuses for such a concern. In either case, however, a similar rhetoric of distance is employed to renounce the disqualifying tactics of traditional apologetics. It was apparently with the intention of nullifying this false impression of consent that Bruce Lincoln composed his now famous, almost overused, *Theses on Method*.<sup>3</sup> According to Lincoln, a

---

2 Quoted in Smith 2013, 78.

3 Originally published in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996, 225–7), 'Theses on Method' was reprinted in the same journal in 2005 (17:1) alongside four critical evaluations and a response by Lincoln himself, all of which originated from sessions at the annual meetings of the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion and the Southeastern region of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta on 5–7 March 2004. A critical evaluation by Tim Fitzgerald appeared in the same journal in 2006 followed by a point-by-point response from Lincoln in 2007. Apart from their recurrent appearance in *MTSR*, Lincoln's theses are also included in Russell McCutcheon's *The Insider/Outsider Problem in Problem in the Study of Religion* (McCutcheon 1999, 395–8) and as an introductory chapter in Lincoln's *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* (Lincoln 2011).

dissociation from the constraints of dogma does not fulfil the expectations of fair play. If the historical study of religion is properly to dissociate itself from its object of study, historical discourse can only justify its cause in the sharpest possible contrast to that object: 'History of religions is a discourse that *resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself.*' (Lincoln 1996, 225. My italics.)

Despite its wonderful economy of formulation, I hesitate to embrace this methodological dictum. My hesitance is the result of an exercise in historical scrutiny. In other words, it results from an orientation of discourse that some would consider quintessentially irreligious. Although I share Lincoln's sense of estrangement from a 'discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal' (Lincoln 1996, 225), my cause for concern is rather the historical viability of the definition. For an analytical category to serve its proper purpose, it is instructive to consider why we came to use it in the way we do. In the case of religion, our preconceptions will always be hampered by the gradual reorientation of thought and practice in Late Antiquity, culminating in an unprecedented modality of absolutising religious policy. I am, of course, referring to the rise of imperial Christianity and Islam. While historians of religions have taken care not to use this new religiosity as a model for *all* religiosities, the former's claim to reach beyond the local, ethnic, and even imperial contexts of religion is perfectly analogous to the latter's universal definition. Hence, what Lincoln conceives as a bipolar tension between two discourses is no less a contingent state of affairs than the discourse from which he seeks refuge. A similar tension might, under different historical circumstances, furnish coexisting modalities of thought and practice with a characteristically religious tinge. Critical scholarship, if understood as an emergent epistemic technique, does not by definition distinguish itself from religion, but rather from that exceptional form of fideistic religiosity with which it once shared numerous ritual and organisational traits in contrast to those of public worship. To delineate this complex dialectic, let me start by unpacking Pico's reference to the table of the gods.

### **Cultic meals and anti-meals in Antiquity**

Themes of commensality have informed religious practice throughout the ages. Prayers and offerings are typically modelled on the convivial sharing of food and flattery, plates and goblets passed around in a display of mutual trust, and ritual banquets arranged in order to increase the flow

of wealth and information. The meal allows for a basic nutritional need to elicit all sorts of cultural extrapolations, ranging from mundane forms of in-group solidarity, via the creation of artificial consanguinity, to the most pretentious stagings of divine cohabitation. Notwithstanding the general pertinence of such themes, we need to acknowledge that Pico's envisioning of sublime dining also reveals the particularities of a literary past. One of the earliest literary testimonies to survive in the West, a fragment from Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, informs us:

For at that time banquets were common, and common the chairs of office to immortal gods and mortal humans. (*Fragmenta Hesiodica*, 1, 6–7. My translation.)

The irrevocable sense of mythical ideality is perceived here against the backdrop of a social factuality, namely animal sacrifice as the epicentre of religious life in the Greek city-state. According to the same poet, gods and mortals first 'parted' or 'had a dispute' (*ekrínonto*) at the ancient city of Mekone (*Theogony*, 535–44). The reason for the dispute was a trick played by Prometheus against Zeus during the preparation of a communal meal. By placing the edible parts of a great ox inside the animal's stomach and smearing its bones in fat, Prometheus violated a fundamental principle of hospitality. While the trick set the standard for future sacrifices, it also resulted in the human community being eternally alienated from the community of the gods. There is a clear logic at work here. Seen from below, from the perspective of quotidian human life, sacrifice answers to the most refined form of social intercourse. Seen from above, from the imaginary vantage point of divine perfection, it instigates the transformation of a once elevated being into a greedy human subject. According to the same logic of etiquette, the moderation of the ritual subject must be further inculcated in order to restore an ideal order. This is why the poet of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* depicts the infant Hermes as a reckless cattle thief who has to emulate the oblique table manners of the Olympian gods in order to gain his stature and receive a place in their midst. That is, he has to abstain from eating the meat of Apollo's slaughtered cows while performing the sacrifice. What Prometheus did to get excluded, Hermes has to undo in order to deserve divine status.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The theme of reversal is consistently evoked in the whole hymn, most glaringly perhaps in the depiction of Hermes' leading the stolen cattle backward in order to deceive his pursuer.

It is easy to perceive the ritual meal as a distinguishing characteristic of different social networks in the ancient world. The particularities of sharing food could thus serve to encode the interests by which members of such networks were unified. At the most basic level of significance, public worship encouraged members of a local community to display rank and solidarity through elaborate games of pretence, all of which might serve to dissimulate the unthinking desire for a festive communion. Although local divinities were constantly invoked on such occasions, either in their capacities as imaginary patrons or as invisible guests of honour, this was not primarily done under some studied soteriological pretext.

At a more distinctive level of significance, however, the cultic meal was understood as a prefiguration of human insight and apotheosis. Early examples of such tendencies are the ritual prohibitions of unofficial cult societies in the late archaic period, the initiated members of which followed the permanent rules of a self-chosen 'means of living', a *bíos*, as opposed to the locally and temporarily constrained rules of official worship (Burkert 1972, 190). The complete vegetarianism allegedly practised by some members of the Pythagorean guild, the so-called *theōrētikoí*,<sup>5</sup> was clearly understood as a renunciation of the official cult of the polis (Burkert 1972, 181f.). It would, however, be misleading to consider such antinomian choices of diet as a dismissal of ritual as such. On the contrary, Pythagoreans developed their own forms of worship through severe constrictions of ritual purity (*hagneíai*). The whole of life was to be ritualised and subjected to a doctrine of permanent validity (Burkert 1972, 174, 190f.). Among the pronouncements of Pythagorean so-called *súmbola* ('passwords') or *akoúsmata* ('heard things') — secret maxims to which the new disciples had to listen in silence while the teacher spoke behind a curtain — a considerable number revolved around sacrificial ritual (Burkert 1972, 477). They concerned what to eat and what not to eat, how to move, how to fan the fire, etc. More importantly, however, the *ákousma* answering the question 'What is most just?' (*tí tò dikaiótaton*) according to Iamblichus' *De vita pythagorica* was indeed, 'To sacrifice.' (*thúein*) (Burkert 1972, 182).

Pythagoreanism resonated with the already familiar cultic procedures of the mystery cults. The teachings of Pythagoras were conceived by his

---

5 The Pythagorean contribution to contemporary scholarly parlance is further highlighted by the term *akribēia*, which was borrowed by modern Germanic languages (such as German [*Akribie*] and Dutch [*acribie*]), perhaps via Church Latin *acribia*, to signify the painstaking efforts of scholarly (especially philological) rigour.



followers as the instructions of an initiator.<sup>6</sup> *Súmbola* memorised by initiates into cultic guilds (*thûāsoi*) could also function as tokens of admission to a life of bliss after death. The highly formulaic so-called Orphic Gold Tablets provide a fascinating glimpse into such practices. Deposited in graves throughout the Greek-speaking world from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE, the tablets — usually in the form of folded gold foils — are inscribed with poems addressing Bacchic initiates on their final passage from life to death. Themes of divine commensality seem implicit in some of the poems, but they also give explicit instructions as to what the dead should avoid consuming. Even if parched with thirst, the initiate is instructed not to drink from the spring beside a white cypress<sup>7</sup>, but to move further ahead to the Lake of Memory.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the initiate is said to be honoured with wine (tablet 26a, b), is sent by Persephone to the seats of the pure (tablet 6, 7), becomes a god (tablet 5), and joins the *thûāsoi* of the initiates (tablet 28).

The Hellenistic concept of a properly antithetical meal, the so-called anti-meal, helps us to identify communities of free association in their conscious effort to withdraw from prevalent forms of social intercourse (Eckhardt 2010, 1045ff and 1060f). Philo's description in *De vita contemplativa* of the Jewish Therapeutae in Alexandria is stereotypically informed by such a notion. Designated as particularly attentive servants of God, the therapeutae are characterised as exemplary philosophers who arrange sacred symposia. Philo emphasises this ritual feature in order to contrast the pious activities of his protagonists with the philosophical symposia described by Plato and Xenophon (the less exemplary 'symposia of others') (40/56). We are also led to understand that the therapeutae are not merely practising any kind of Jewish worship. Men and women dine separately (69); there are no slaves (70); neither wine nor meat is consumed (85), only water, bread, salt, and aromatic leaves of hyssop (73); they prepare this 'most sacred food' and bring in the table out of reverence for (and with reference to) the sacred table set up

6 Fritz Graf paraphrasing Proclus's *Theologia Platona* (Graf & Johnston 2007).

7 'Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves. Do not even approach this spring!' (Graf & Johnston 2007, 5 [tablet 1, 4–5].)

8 '[...] there are guards before it. / They will ask you, with astute wisdom, / what are you seeking in the darkness of murky Hades. / Say, "I am a son of Earth and the starry Sky, I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me / cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink." / And they will announce you to the Cthonian King, and they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory. / And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other / glorious initiates and *bacchoi* travel.' (Graf & Johnston 2013, 5 [tablet 1, 7–16].)

in the the entrance hall of the temple in Jerusalem (81). The familiar pagan notion of the *thiāsos* allows Philo to engage in a double-acting rhetoric. He means to persuade his reader that the Jewish therapeutae, while remaining true to their own traditions, are in fact actively *living* the moderate life about which 'the other' (i.e. gentile) philosophers have only been *talking*.<sup>9</sup>

Greek philosophy certainly had its active share in this rhetoric, for it was along similar lines of confabulation that Theophrastus, a successor of Aristotle, described the Jews as a people of philosophers. They are said not to feast on the flesh of sacrificed animals, but to burn them whole (*holokautoûntes*) during the night. They fast for the intervening days, converse with each other about the deity, and immerse themselves in the theory of stars (*ástrôn poioûntai tēn theōrian*). Contrary to Philo, however, Theophrastus concludes that the Jews behave like this under compulsion and not from their own free will.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing prevents us from recognising the sacrificial exigencies of public worship, and the unofficial anti-meal of the *thiāsos*, as being equally *ritualistic* in the sense that they are extrapolations of the daily meal. However, whereas the former distinguished itself from everyday meals through excess and hyperbole, the latter did so through deficit and suspension of judgement. Encoded into the latter form of social intercourse was not an upheaval of sacrifice, but rather a perfection and sublation of the whole ritual apparatus. Attentiveness was no longer considered a precautionary measure in a temporary cultic setting, but a means of transforming oneself into something else, of changing one's way of looking at the world.<sup>11</sup> Although the specific means and ends of such spiritual exercises would differ greatly, the attitude of the initiate was typically considered a matter of life and death

9 We need to keep this scenario in mind when we consider why Paul, in his *First Letter to the Corinthians* (11 33–34), warns the parishioners to visit the Lord's supper on an empty stomach: 'So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.'

10 Theophrastus quoted in Porphyry's *De abstinence* (2,26) (Stroumsa 2009, 60). Cf. the conflicting view in Philo's *De vita contemplativa* (71).

11 The notion of the human subject's care and transformation of itself in ancient philosophy is a recurrent topic in the late writings of Michel Foucault, who also devoted one of his last courses at the Collège de France to its exposition posthumously published under the title *L'herméneutique du sujet* (Foucault 2001). Foucault had been largely influenced by the historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot (1995), whose late work *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* concisely delineates the central ideas. Guy Stroumsa's *La fin du sacrifice: Le mutation religieuses de l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile, 2005) (translated into English as Stroumsa 2009) further develops the notion of spiritual transformation and its impact on sacrificial ideology in Late Antiquity.

to the same extent as it was taken up with a singular point of stable reference. At the expense of immediate needs and local obligations, even to the point of becoming an object of ridicule and public accusation, the subject of the self-chosen *bíos* relied insistently on the delayed payback of insight and salvation.<sup>12</sup> Before the large-scale, imperial conversion to a singular *bíos*, religious behaviour had thrived in a perceived tension between two poles, both of which exhibited recognisably religious traits; two religiosities vacillating between local games of momentary pretence and permanently universalising strategies of self-transformation. Although the dichotomisation is somewhat simplistic, we may need to maintain it in order to clarify a considerably more distorted view.

### The secret life of the academy

A new sense of contrast between Christianity and pagan religiosity had, from the late fourth century onwards, through the decrees of the converted emperors, gradually erased a previous contrast between public worship and the rites of the *thîāsos*. When allegiance to the exclusive latter was no longer considered a private matter, the public claims of the former became enmeshed in the soteriological claims of the latter. Public worship and personal faith were now considered indistinguishable aspects of piety, whereas the presence of an autonomous intellectual laity posed a constant threat to an ecclesiastical regime of truth.<sup>13</sup> One way of pin-pointing this castling move of religious policy is to analyse the changing iconography of intellectuals in Late Antiquity.

In a groundbreaking study from 1995 Paul Zanker demonstrated how the iconic representation of the philosopher — typically male, bearded and

---

12 One of the most tenacious allegorisations of this dilemma is the story of the philosopher qua astronomer who falls into a well while studying the stars. Hans Blumenberg's (1987) perceptive exploration of the fable's repercussions in Western thought, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin: Eine Urgeschichte der Theorie*, initially (13f.) highlights the importance of conflicting perspectives in the plot: the exploratory gaze of the philosopher and the condescending gaze of the Thracian maid. These conflicting perspectives, both easily recognisable to anyone involved in the less pragmatic endeavours of scholarship and science, imply a reversal of the expected power relations. She, the low-cast woman from a foreign country, now speaks with the authority of the polis, whereas he, the nobleman from the ancient city, has abandoned his civil duties and turned his attention to a foreign cause. Under his scrutiny she recognises no domestic divinities. They exist only where he falls into the well. For this reason, her malicious joy is fully justified and attuned to the interests of the city.

13 Cf. especially Stroumsa's discussion of the inversion of the pairs sacred/profane and public/private (Stroumsa 2009, 90f.).

long-haired, surrounded by muses and disciples, carrying book rolls and codices, etc. — was subjected to a far-reaching artistic re-evaluation in Late Antiquity (Zanker 1995).<sup>14</sup> The image of Christ and his followers was inserted into a familiar pictorial formula to make Christian teachings appear as the continuation of a long and respectable tradition of philosophical learning. Even in portrayals of miracles, Christ himself, the apostles, and saints seem to emulate the appearance of pagan intellectuals. This was apparently not just a superficial strategy of visual imagery, for influential Christians explicitly encouraged each other to adopt this appearance in their daily lives. Tertullian composed a whole speech 'On the mantle' (*De pallio*), in which he encouraged his brethren to start wearing the typical outfit of philosophers (the so-called *pallium*) in a consciously counter-cultural spirit (Zanker 1995, 290–3).<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein Clement of Alexandria wrote in favour of the beard 'on the grounds that it gives a man a dignified and awe-inspiring appearance'.<sup>16</sup>

In structural response to the encryption and transmutation of pagan philosophy in early Christian theology, the antithetical iconography of the 'new philosophy' encrypts and inverts the image of the pagan intellectual. Zanker posits a particularly compelling argument in this regard towards the end of his final chapter ('The Power of the Muses'). Hellenistic philosophers were aware of the idea that all intellectual activity, even in its capacity as a corollary of human volition, was only possible through a form of divine dispensation. To think truthfully and creatively, using one's own critical intellect, still implied the service of divine creatures. One class of beings to inhabit this theoretical space was the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who had long been considered sources of poetic inspiration. In their role as handmaidens of the poet or philosopher they did not force themselves upon their master. Zanker even points to a Roman votive relief portraying the Muse as respectfully looking up at the poet just 'as a school-girl to her teacher.' (Zanker 1995, 328) Through her transposition into the Christian iconography of Holy Writ, however, the female companion of the bearded man is transformed into an authorising monitor. A case in point is an illustration in the sixth century Rossano Gospels. Saint Mark is shown seated, writing the Gospel, while a standing female figure traces his text with her finger:

14 See especially ch. VI (The Cult of Learning Transfigured).

15 Tertullian ends his speech by exclaiming (*De Pallio*, 6,4): 'Rejoice, pallium, and exult! A better philosophy has deigned you worthy, from the moment that it is the Christian whom you started to dress.'

16 *Paedagogus* (3,11,60) paraphrased in Zanker 1995, 290.

[A] female personification — or is she an angel without wings? — has taken the place of the Muse and dictates word for word to Saint Mark, even going over with her finger and checking what he has just written. The concept of the transmission of knowledge will from now on be dominated by such images of authority. The medieval teacher sits or stands elevated above his pupils and dictates to them. (Zanker 1995, 330)

We can see here an example of what Lincoln would immediately recognise as a discursive inclination to — as he might be paraphrased — write of things eternal and transcendent under the equally transcendent and eternal authority of God. Saint Mark is clearly not depicted as a free intellectual, straining his critical faculties in order to reach the indeterminate solution to a puzzle. Nevertheless, he has borrowed some unmistakable characteristics of the intellectual, superficially pretending to be the kind of bookish, bearded scholar that his informed viewer knows him not to be.

Since the teachings of Christ were so persistently hailed by their early supporters as an exclusive corrective to pagan philosophy, despite the latter's obvious yet encrypted inclusion in those teachings, we are not surprisingly led to consider critical scholarship as a corrective to that view. This should not, however, lead us to equate a specifically Christian outlook with *any* religious modality. However, attempts at tracing the origins of Greek philosophy are characteristically informed by the notion that the first philosophically valid statements were formally restricted to, and ultimately obstructed by, a discourse permeated by myth and epic.<sup>17</sup> According to this distorted view, the delusion of myth defines the essence of religion (the inferior yet imputed 'theory') from which the philosopher seeks to detach himself by means of inference and pure reason. Representing the tension between early philosophy and religion in such terms is anachronistic. It results from a regressive formation of myth as an article of faith. It would be more accurate to assume that pagan religiosity reaches us through philosophy, with distorted hindsight, as a corrective to fideistic religiosity.

We need to recall the fact that some of the pagan sites of worship targeted by the early imperial church were also centres of learning. The academy in

---

17 The following statement by Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1993, 130) symptomatically evokes this view: '[...] die von Homer und Hesiod ausgehende große epische Überlieferung, [hat] trotz ihrer mythischen und erzählenden Form, philosophischen Wert [...] Daß zwischen episch-religiöser Sicht und begrifflichem Denken ein enger Zusammenhang bestehen kann, liegt auf der Hand. Zu einer Zäsur gelangen wir erst bei Platon, und zwar dann, wenn es als besonders kennzeichnendes Merkmal seiner Vorgänger hinstellt, daß sie Märchen erzählt haben.'

Athens, which we shall consider soon, bore all the hallmarks of a religious institution, of a *thîāsos* (Athanassiadi 2004, 213). Another example is the Serapaeum in Alexandria.

According to the historian Sozomen's fifth century account of civil skirmishes in Alexandria occasioned by the emperor's intensified promulgation of decrees against pagan worship in 391, a man named Olympius is said to have joined a crowd of disheartened pagans (simply referred to as 'Greeks' [*Héllenes*]) inside the temple of Serapis. (1984, 7,15.) The crowd had barricaded itself into the temple after a series of retributions for the local bishop's exposure and ridicule of sacred objects concealed inside a temple of Dionysos. Olympius tries to heighten the spirit of resistance, insisting that it is better to die before renouncing the ancient customs. With an apparent effort to efface the fear of death among his fellow pagans, he evokes the desecration of their statues. While the statues are mere appearances made of perishable matter, he maintains that the powers that inhabit them have gone to heaven. It is a significant detail in Sozomen's portrayal of the agitator that Olympius is said to have joined the other pagans 'in the appearance of a philosopher' (*en philosóphou skhêmati*). Although Sozomen is clearly employing a familiar ironic formula, suggesting that Olympius was merely a fake philosopher, it is evident from other sources (such as the 10th century Byzantine encyclopedia commonly referred to as the *Suda*) that Olympius was indeed a Neoplatonist of Cilician origin who had arrived in Alexandria to serve as a priest in the cult of Serapis. His role in the account is thus characteristic of the part played by Neoplatonists in the resistance against Christians during the third and fourth centuries. Another prominent figure in that struggle was the philosopher and mathematician Hypatia. Having survived the skirmishes in 391, she was eventually put to death by a Christian mob in 415. It should be emphasised, furthermore, that the Serapeum in Alexandria had long served as a prestigious seat of learning, containing within its walls a court; temples of Serapis, Isis, and Anubis; a library; an incubation hall; and a priestly dormitory.<sup>18</sup>

According to a still widespread opinion, the last branch of Neoplatonism to remain uninfluenced by the official Christianisation of the Roman Empire was finally broken in the first half of the sixth century. Emperor Justinian, who had used different legislative means to suppress both paganism and heterodox Christianity in the Byzantine Empire, issued a decree in 529 to instigate the closing of the Platonic Academy in Athens. Justin-

---

18 Cf. Laurent Angliviel de la Beaumelle's and Guy Sabbah's annotations to Sozomen's *Historia ecclesiastica* (2008, 136f).

ian's religious policy is usually considered to have been a catalyst for the school's last pagan philosophers — Damascius, Simplicius, and a few of their companions — to take refuge in the Sasanian court, from which they were permitted to return three years later.<sup>19</sup> Due to the great uncertainty concerning the group's ongoing fate and whereabouts, the closing of the Academy is often considered the death blow to paganism in the Byzantine Empire. While a chain of transmission seems to be broken at this point, we are left with an enigmatic gap in the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Arabs some centuries later.

Michel Tardieu (1986) proposed a fascinating solution to this puzzle. Proceeding from earlier research into a mysterious group referred to in the Quran as Sabians (*ṣābi'ūn*, *ṣābi'a*), and to a group with the same name known from later sources to have inhabited the city of Harran in southeastern Anatolia, Tardieu develops the hypothesis that the Arabic term *ṣābi'* could roughly correspond to the broad sense of the term *hēllē*, i.e. 'Greek' or 'pagan'. He argues that a so-called *maḡma'* ('gathering place') in Harran — described by the travelling Muslim historian al-Mas'ūdī in the tenth century — was in fact a Platonic Academy, the activities of which had begun in the sixth century when it was to provide a new haven for Simplicius and the other exiles of Athens. Although Tardieu's hypothesis remains a matter of scholarly dispute, we need not wholeheartedly subscribe to it in order to appreciate al-Mas'ūdī's eyewitness account of the Sabians in Harran.

What unfolds before us here is nothing less than a projection of the divided pagan community that one would have expected to be but a distant memory in the Levant by the tenth century. Al-Mas'ūdī divides the Harranians into two categories: the 'philosophers' (*ḥašwīyya*), the vulgar adherents to the pagan religion of the city, and the 'sages', in the strict sense of the term. The vulgar pagans practise divination, make animal sacrifices to local divinities (the foremost among whom is *Šamāl*), and celebrate ensuing cultic meals in their temple. The 'sages', on the other hand, avoid such sacrificial and divinatory practices, with the exception of 'mysterious and secret ceremonies'. Their *maḡma'* is a gathering place for intellectuals (Tardieu 1986, 17ff.). Its door knob bears an Aramaic inscription — a veritable invitation to the *bíos philosophikós* — which can be traced, via Neoplatonic expositions of the Platonic dialogue *First Alcibades* (133c), to the Socratic precept of self-examination. Part of the inscription contains a maxim. It is explained to al-Mas'ūdī by a certain Mālik ibn 'Uqbūn, who is probably the

---

<sup>19</sup> The details of the story remain a matter of some controversy. For a critical discussion, cf. especially Erhart 1998.

leader of the sages in Harran: 'He who knows his own nature will become divine.' (Tardieu 1986, 13, 16)

The school in Harran functioned like all schools of philosophy. It had its own programmes and rituals. The tasks of its members included reading and interpreting texts, translating, and producing commentaries. But the *mağma* of Mālik ibn 'Uqbūn was also an institution passing on a pagan tradition of apotheosis and critical self-fulfilment.

When the urban community of Sabians in Harran was extinguished about a century after al-Mas'ūdī's visit to the city, important aspects of their style of scholarship had already been passed on to other centres of learning in the Islamic world, not least to Baghdad.<sup>20</sup> However, the triangular scheme evoked by al-Mas'ūdī's unique testimony — two coexisting modalities of paganism (a religion of the *bíos*, and that of a local civic community) supervised by a Muslim historian from the third angle of the caliphate — was bound to become distorted. It is within this fractured space that adherents of the *bíos akadēmikós* begin their new journey towards a perceived position outside the sphere of religion. A decisive move in that direction was made when Cossimo de' Medici, only four centuries later, decided to sponsor the activities of a so-called Platonic Academy in Florence. Led by Marsilio Ficino, it counted among its members the young Pico della Mirandola, and stimulated the emergence of similarly autonomous *thiāsoi* in the West through the reintroduction of Neoplatonism. The old-school pagan intellectual was about to return.<sup>21</sup>

20 Not least through Tabit ibn Qurra (835–901), who had moved from Harran to Baghdad to found a new Sabian community there under the protection of the caliph al-Mu'tadi.

21 The transmission of Neoplatonism to the Western world in the 15th century is currently a focal concern in the study of Western esotericism. A key figure in this process was the Byzantine philosopher Gemistos Plethon (1355–c.1452), who also played an important role at the ecumenical Council of Florence. Gemistos had, in his turn, been influenced by a mysterious man called Elissaeus (Elisha) in an Ottoman environment, perhaps in the city of Bursa. Elissaeus is said to have been sent into exile ('in barbarian territory') from Constantinople, and is described in a letter by the Patriarch Scholarius as 'ostensibly a Jew but in fact a Hellenist [pagan]' and 'an adherent of Averroes and other Persian and Arabic interpreters of Aristotle's works'. (Woodhouse 1986, 24). Scholarius complains in the same letter that Gemistos 'was so dominated by Hellenic ideas that he took little trouble about learning traditional Christianity, apart from the most superficial aspects. In reality it was not for the sake of the Greek language, like all Christians, that he read and studied Greek literature [...] but in order to associate himself with them.' (Woodhouse 1986, 24). For a comprehensive treatment of these issues in the wider context of Western academic culture, see Hanegraaf 2012, 33f. Cf. also Hladký 2014, 191ff.



## Conclusions

I have chosen a meandering detour in my attempt to readdress the issue of religion and the humanities, of religion *within* or *without* the humanities. Before making some concluding remarks in this regard, let me summarise what I consider to be the most salient basis of religious behaviour beyond its superficial restriction to a permanent *belief in*.

Despite the occasional insistence on unconditional faith, religious participation can be widely attested as the result of a voluntary and momentary disposition of mind. We may affirm beliefs by acting *as if* believing what is conceived not to be true, or we may place something under scrutiny by acting *as if* not knowing what is conceived to be true according to immediate judgement.<sup>22</sup> A juxtaposition of these frames of mind should make clear how they differ, but also how they are united by a reluctance to accept indisposed preconceptions. If the suspension of disbelief implies a disposition towards artificiality (or so-called apparatuses), the suspension of judgement implies a disposition towards indeterminacy. While such voluntary dispositions of mind may come into conflict, they may also coexist within the same ritual framework. Take, for example, the case of Graeco-Roman animal sacrifice: the first attitude (suspension of disbelief) ensures the acceptance of circumstances that are not intuitively apparent (e.g. the conjuring of animal consent and divine participation), whereas the second (suspension of judgement) ensures a submission to arational processes (e.g. inspecting the sacrificial animal's entrails in order to receive an indeterminate reply).

The latter sense of inculcated attention is certainly not foreign to the practice of critical scholarship. Herodotus came close to formulating a divinatory principle of suspended judgement when, at the beginning of his *Histories*, he claimed to be *obliged to say what had been said* (*egô opheîlô légein tà legómēna* [7,152,3]) about the Persian wars, despite his strong opinions as to who had done wrong to the Greeks (1,5). It was apparently in a similar vein that Friedrich von Schlegel, in one of his *Athenaeum Fragments* (80), famously characterised the historian as 'a prophet facing backwards' (*ein rückwärts gekehrter Prophet*) (Schlegel 1967 [1798], 176).

The purportedly religious traces of scholarship should not be exaggerated, but it would be no less an exaggeration to reduce these traces to obsolete paraphernalia and empty modes of ceremonial parlance. While I am aware of the scholarly efforts to avoid bias and subservience, I am not trying to discredit these efforts in a nagging spirit of relativism. I am, how-

---

22 Regarding the concept of 'as if-ness', cf. Benavides 2010, 239–253.

ever, concerned about the tendency to over-determine the notion of religious practice as a proto-political cover-up, and even as a misinformed groping in the dark, for which critical scholarship provides the ultimate cure. For the sake of theoretical utility, I do not hold religion to be all about effectuating interests through uncritical compliance, nor do I find any historical justification for its reduction to a theory of the world, from which the scholar seeks to detach her or himself by means of pure reason. In stressing this, I am not morally concerned about religion, believing it to have been unduly discredited as an undifferentiated whole. I consider myself neither a caretaker nor a transcendentalist. I simply want to acknowledge the multimodal character of this human propensity as a necessary clue to its historical *raison d'être*.

We should not disregard the fact that we, as members of the academy, still maintain specific communal concerns by arranging symposia and round tables, by engaging in what we know as *disciplinary* practice, and by imagining that such forms of ritualised behaviour foster a sense of truth and reality beyond the premature bounds of our immediate judgement. The communal sharing of food and ideas is perhaps the most glaring example of a social event neutralising the objective *what* and the methodological *how* of our academic aspirations. There is more than a trivial affinity between *what* we, as students of religion, concern ourselves with and *how* we consider these concerns to demand certain ingrained standards of etiquette.

It does not seem entirely out of place to regard contemporary scholars of the humanities as the distant heirs of figures such as Simplicius, Mālik ibn 'Uqbūn, and Pico della Mirandola. All of them led the kind of examined life that many worried intellectuals now believe to be facing a crisis of immense proportions (Nussbaum 2010). If humanist knowledge is only justified in terms of its servitude to some predefined aspect of public life, it will never expose us to the value of life itself, nor will it encourage us to historicise that particular *kind* of knowledge in order to reach beyond it. It was precisely for this reason that Socrates defined the examined life as the only life worth living.<sup>23</sup> He did so in a spirit of civil disobedience, in opposition to a more short-sighted gain in the sphere of public interest, and it is precisely for these reasons that the task of the humanities seems so precious in our time. When Pico, with an undeniable nod to the Socratic ideal, imagines intellectual life as an invitation to a life *in the company of gods*, we need to pay particular attention to the concept of divinity inherent in this notion. For any exponent of the works of Plato, the most familiar characterisation of intellectual con-

---

23 'The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being' (*ho dè anexétastos bíos ou biôtòs anthrôpôi* [Apology, 38a]). My translation.

templation would be that of the the mind's ascent to knowledge of divine forms. According to this concept, furthermore, divine forms have nothing to do with the fabulous creatures of myth. Instead, they are the means of conceptualising an ideal reality — including, for instance, the objects and structures of mathematics — independent of human artifice and persuasion.

Walter Capps once remarked that 'religious studies may have created a phenomenon against which it has been judiciously trying to distinguish itself.' (Smith 2013,73) I am uncomfortable with this rhetoric of contagion, although not, of course, as long as Capps's *distinction* merely signifies the *distance* required to establish *anything* as an object of scientific knowledge, which would indeed be a sound but somewhat trivial point to make. What concerns me is rather the rhetorical incentive to reduce religion to the impoverished, credulous, and superstitious affair that traditional apologetics have always disqualified as *falsa religio*, as the religion of others. A modern (or modernist) approach to reality in its scientifically grounded version of preconceived reality, i.e. a reality that runs short of everything that religious people consider supernatural, entails a vague and distorted echo of a pagan approach to the divine. What the pagan philosophers once considered traceable as divine reality through disciplined means of cognizance, the moderns now conceptualise as natural as opposed to a Christian appropriation of untraceable divinity. It all seems to end and begin with Shakespeare, whose contribution to the understanding of Western modernity appears quintessential. In the play *All's Well That Ends Well* he combines two cornerstones of our contemporary condition (*modern* and *supernatural*) as he has old Lord Lafew utter the following words (Act 2, Scene 3):

They say that miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

\* \* \*

PETER JACKSON is Professor of History of religions at Stockholm University, Sweden.  
E-mail: peter.jackson@rel.su.se

*Bibliography**Primary sources**Homeric Hymns*

1936 T. W. Allen & W. R. Halliday & E. E. Sikes (eds) *The Homeric Hymns*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Oxford Classical Texts.)

Herodotos *Histories*

1997 Haiim B. Rosén (ed.) *Herodoti Historiae* Vol. II, libros V-IX continens. Leipzig: Teubner.

Hesiod *Catalogue of Women*

1967 Reinhold Merkelbach & Martin L. West (eds) *Fragmenta Hesiodaea*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hesiod *Theogony*

1966 Martin West (ed.) *Theogony*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Philo *De vita contemplativa*

1963 F. Daumas & P. Miquel (eds and trans.) *De vita contemplativa*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

Plato *First Alcibiades*

1901 Burnet, John (ed.) *Platonis opera*. Vol. II. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sozomen *Historia ecclesiastica*

1984 Joseph Bidez (ed.), *Sozomenus Kirchengeschichte*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

2008 Laurent de la Baumelle et al. (eds and trans.) *Histoire ecclésiastique, livres VI-IX*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf. (Sources chrétiennes 516.)

Tertullian *De Pallio*

2005 Vincent Hunink (ed. and trans.) *De Pallio*. Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben.

*Secondary sources***Athanassiadi, Polymnia**

2004 Heroization, Apotheosis (3.d.) IV. Ascent to heroic or divine status in antiquity: continuities and transformations – *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (ThesCRA) Vassilis Lambrinoudakis et al. (eds). Vol. II, 212–14. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum.

**Benavides, Gustavo**

2010 On the Production of Religious Configurations – *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, 239–53.

**Blumenberg, Hans**

1987 *Das Lachen der Thrakerin: Eine Urgeschichte der Theorie*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

**Burkert, Walter**

1972 *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

**Eckhardt, Benedikt**

2010 Mahl V (Kultmahl) – *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Georg Schöllingen et al. (eds) Vol. XXIII, 1012–1105. Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann

**Erhart, Victoria**

1998 The Context and Contents of Priscianus of Lydia's *Solutionum ad Chosoroem*. *Medieval Philosophy*. Papers presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy in Boston, Massachusetts, August 10–15, 1998. <<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/MainMedi.htm>>, accessed 1 December 2015.

**Fitzgerald, Tim**

2006 Bruce Lincoln's 'Theses on Method': Antitheses – Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 18, 392–423.

**Foucault, Michel**

2001 *L'herméneutique du sujet*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard.

**Gadamer, Hans Georg**

1993 *Der Anfang der Philosophie*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun.

**Graf, Fritz & Sarah Iles Johnston**

2007 *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. London/New York: Routledge.

**Hadot, Pierre**

1995 *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* Paris: Gallimard.

**Hanegraaf, Wouter J.**

2012 *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Hladký, Vojtěch**

2014 *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium, Between Hellenism and Orthodoxy*. Surrey: Ashgate.

**Lincoln, Bruce**

1996 Theses on Method – *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, 225–7.

2007 Concessions, Confessions, Clarifications: By Way of Response to Tim Fitzgerald – *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19, 163–8.

2011 *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

**McCutcheon (ed.)**

1999 *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*. London and New York: Cassel.

**Nussbaum, Martha**

2010 *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

**Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni**

1956 *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486). Translated by A. Robert Caponigri. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc..

**von Schlegel, Friedrich August Wilhelm**

1967 *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Ernst Behler et al. (eds). Vol. II. Paderborn: Fridinand Schöningh Verlag.

**Shakespeare, William**

1623 *All's Well, that Ends Well – Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. Published according to the True Original Copies. London: Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount.

**Smith, Jonathan Z.**

2013 *On Teaching Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Stroumsa, Guy**

2009 *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

**Tardieu, Michel**

1986 *Sābiens coraniques et 'Sābiens' de Ḥarrān – Journal asiatique* 274, 1–44.

**Woodhouse, C. M.**

1986 *Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

**Zanker, Paul**

1995 *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press.

## Book Reviews

**Cora Alexa Døving and Siv Ellen Kraft:** *Religion i pressen*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013, 235 pp.

The claim that ‘God is back’, for better or worse, alludes to the way in which religion as a phenomenon is currently attracting more attention than it did a few decades ago. This applies as much to the media as elsewhere. The material on which Døving and Kraft’s book *Religion i pressen* (Religion in the Press) is based consists mostly of newspaper stories published in recent years, read now in the light of social, cultural, and political contexts. Some of the analytical tools used are taken from critical discourse analysis. On this basis the study analyses media coverage (including feature and debate articles) of such diverse topics as: religion and the royal family and the significance of Christianity for the Norwegian national identity and cultural heritage, especially after the disestablishment of the church in 2012; the *Snåsa Man* (an exemplar of folk religiosity); and the phenomenon of Hanne Nabintu Herland (an exemplar of conservative Christianity). The second part of the book discusses media coverage of minority religions, and devotes two chapters to Islam and one to Judaism. The final chapter is titled ‘After 22 July: Religious pluralism as moral imperative’, and concerns itself with Anders Behring Breivik’s murder of seventy-seven people. Both authors contributed equally to the book.

Døving and Kraft’s starting point is that ‘the Norwegian news media are founded on a hegemonic understanding of public life as a secular ground and that journalists (and others) monitor communication and question violations’. This assertion of a hegemonic discourse seems reasonable and – naturally enough – is related to the fundamental cultural change processes which Norwegian society has undergone, especially during the last century, and which can be described using terms such as ‘secularisation’ and ‘pluralisation’. The degree to which religion can be said to play a significant role in contemporary Norwegian public life must be on (post)modern terms.

An interesting assertion made in this connection is that Hanne Nabintu Herland has understood this, and for tactical purposes translates her allegedly Christian conservative message with the help of a secularised language. An entire chapter of the book is devoted to media coverage of Nabintu Herland, who is a historian of religion and a controversial public debater in Norway. This suggests that it was not without reason that Espen Ottosen, the information officer of Norway’s largest Low Church Lutheran organisation, the Norwegian Lutheran Mission, offered words of caution in the Christian daily *Vårt Land* about ‘Christian lone wolves’, his term for Christian individuals who speak solely on their own behalf. The fact

that individuals who represent neither organised faith communities nor authoritative bodies, and whose opinions based on their own research, are given such free rein in the media and elsewhere in the public domain also says much about today's media coverage of religion.

Other individuals mentioned in *Religion i pressen* include the Norwegian Princess Märtha Louise and the farmer Joralf Gerstad, better known as the Snåsa Man. Anyone following the Norwegian media in recent years will be familiar with these individuals, who represent the detachment from organised religion that has marked an important religious trend in post-war society. In some ways, Princess Märtha and Joralf Gjerstad are both religious individualists, concerned not so much with religious doctrine or dogma as with religious experience and with helping others. Nonetheless, Kraft's treatment of their respective relationships with the press is as objective as it is when dealing with the other phenomena analysed in the first half of the book.

The second half of the book, which was written by Døving and in which two chapters are devoted to Islam and one to Judaism, deals with what can collectively be referred to as minority religions. 'Why is media representation of Islam such a potent force?' asks Døving. The answer to this question alone deserves a whole book, for there is no doubt that a connection does exist between the renewed media interest in religion and the fact that Islam, for

better or worse, is making increasingly significant inroads in Western society. A dramatic increase in the media's coverage of Islam and of events pertaining to it – a 'renewed visibility of public religion' – has taken place. Muslims constitute approximately two to three per cent of the Norwegian population, yet Islam is sometimes presented as a major concern in the media; problem areas related to this religion are particularly highlighted.

Some corrections to Døving and Kraft's book are warranted. The presentation of Linda Woodhead as an English historian of religion is incorrect. Granted, she is English, but her academic background is in theology and her main interest today lies in the sociology of religion. The late Inge Lønning is presented as a member of parliament for the Christian Democrats when he was, in fact, a member of the Conservative Party.

All in all, *Religion i pressen* can be recommended to anyone interested in the relationship between religion and the media or, in a broader context, between religion and public life. Today many people's first encounter with religion and religiosity occurs via the media and in the public domain, and this makes research in the field of religion and media important. However, the enormous scale of the field and the number of phenomena included in the book are not conducive to a truly in-depth analysis of the material. Nevertheless, Døving and Kraft's book is of value for those who can read Norwegian. For them, it might



serve as an important supplement to the book *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* (Ashgate 2013) by Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, which deals with the complexity surrounding cases involving religion in the press and public life. Although these authors deal mainly with the British media and British public life, the issues raised are easily recognisable on both sides of the Atlantic. The two publications, *Religion i pressen* and *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred*, could therefore be read as supplements to each other.

**Olav Hovdelien**

Oslo and Akershus  
University College, Norway

Olav Hovdelien is Associate Professor at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. E-mail: olav.hovdelien@hioa.no

**Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer and David A. Warburton (eds):** *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*. Durham: Acumen, 2013, 456 pp.

Religion as a concept connects diverse disciplines with their slightly differing definitions and uses for it. Archaeology is a field of study with a long tradition of employing the term in interpreting ancient artefacts and ways of life. Since the 1990s, however, with the increasing awareness of the importance of conceptual and theoretical assumptions, archaeologists have started to criticise the ways in which the concept of religion has been used, and have called for stronger collaboration with scholars of religious studies. Both the traditional and critical attitudes are present in this handbook of religions in ancient Europe.

The compilation covers the diversity of religions from the arrival of the first humans during the Upper Palaeolithic to the advent of Christianity. In addition to the introduction the compilation consists of twenty-seven articles divided into two sections. The first ten articles discuss religions in prehistoric societies, while the last seventeen deal with religions that can be studied with the help of written accounts. The authors were instructed to use the best available sources and critically assess their value for interpreting ancient religions. The majority of the articles, however, are more or less straightforward overviews of

a particular geographical region or chronological period. There are, however, a few chapters addressing the development of the archaeological approach to the religions of the past. Among them are sketches of the work of Francesco d'Errico and Ian Hodder.

The first set of articles, focusing on prehistoric religions, is the most interesting part of the book theoretically. The primary point at issue concerning the human past is when and why religions emerged. Are they specific to the human as a species, or did the earlier hominids also have something resembling religion? The earliest cases of visual representation and symbolic expression date to the Palaeolithic, but the question remains as to whether they also indicate the existence of religions. Should the mere non-functional use of material culture be interpreted as evidence of religious thought? D'Errico argues that the human use of symbols emerged only gradually. Emmanuel Anati, in contrast, supports the view that religion is among the human-specific capacities, and thus a single prehistoric religion lies at the origin of later religions. Another set of problems is related to the transition from Palaeolithic hunter-gathering groups into Neolithic agricultural societies. How did the new mind-set, forms of subsistence, and increasing social complexity affect religions, or what was the role of religions in bringing about the changes?

In his contribution Jarl Nordbladh discusses the social changes

of the late 1960s and 1970s and their effect on theoretical thinking in archaeology and the subsequent study of religions. Using rock art as his case study, Nordbladh argues that there is a risk of constructing interpretations which exist only as the product of the scholarly traditions of organising knowledge. One may wonder, however, whether it is ever possible to make such a clear-cut division between knowledge and its discursive framework if we are to assess interpretations in their 'fullness'.

The book's most thought-provoking chapter discusses Hodder's work on the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük. He has consistently avoided the conventional, religiously loaded vocabulary of archaeology, and created new ways of analysing ancient human communities. Hodder approaches past phenomena as bound by material and practice. Indeed, he argues that we should not conceptualise religion in any modern sense when speaking about the Neolithic, since it was integrated into every interaction between humans, animals, and objects: religion was an aspect of all material entanglements.

In the following chapters Flemming Kaul writes about the iconography of the Sun God in the Nordic Bronze Age, and Kristan Kristiansen analyses the cyclical changes between rationalism and romanticism in archaeological interpretation. He points out that both Kaul and Nordbladh emphasise local archaeological evidence, dismissing the wider European context, which includes

the Near Eastern written sources. They are, Kristiansen argues, examples of how certain theoretical assumptions lead to the exclusion of certain types of evidence. The last chapter of the first section is written by two of the editors, and it is a welcome commentary on the preceding articles. It contextualises the contributions clearly, and points out their weaknesses and strengths.

The second section examines ancient religions after the advent of literacy. The first chapter by David A. Warburton discusses the Minoan and Mycenaean religion. It includes a lengthy epilogue that introduces the main characteristics of religions in Greek and Roman Antiquity: architecture, iconography, the pantheon, myths, and attributes. Warburton concludes that the study of religions in the early historical periods, in cases where there is an abundance of written material, tends to be more structural, whereas the lack of texts may lead scholars to concentrate on identifying objects and gods at the expense of a broader view. The situation, however, is more complicated. The key is not so much the availability of written sources, but the scholarly framework within which the author builds their argument. For example, some scholars writing about religions in Antiquity, where there are plenty of written sources, assume that when catalogues of gods, places of worship, iconography, and myths have been listed, the religions have been satisfactorily described, while other scholars attempt to deal with more

structural issues, even if the sources are sparse.

In Antiquity the most important process affecting religions appears to have been Romanisation, the spread and transformation of Roman culture in Europe. The role of the process of hybridisation is further emphasised by research in which the Greek and Roman religions are represented as unified systems with matching myths and ritual practices. However, as Lars Albinus points out, the Greek religion was rather a conglomerate of various traditions, and Susanne William Rasmussen argues that even though there was some interaction between myth and ritual in the Roman religion, myth played a somewhat marginal role in religious practices. Nevertheless, from the perspective of religious studies, the chapters on the Graeco-Roman cult of Isis and the cult of Mithras are more interesting, as they are not burdened by the classical tradition and its firm belief in the homogeneity of ancient religions.

The remaining articles discuss ancient religions outside the Roman world. Again, the quality of contributions varies. One of the most problematic articles is Karen Bek-Pedersen's piece on the insular Celtic religion. She does not discuss the Romanticist Celtic Revival at all, although it has had a major effect on the study of Celtic religions; indeed, she seems herself to be affected by the revivalist discourse in the rather striking statements she makes about the Celts. For example,

Bek-Pedersen writes that 'they were never empire builders,' instead, 'the Celts appear to have had a passion for showing off fine clothing, beautifully decorated weapons and jewellery, and all sorts of fine ornaments' (p. 280). She also argues that the Celtic worldview had 'an intellectual emphasis' because the Celts transmitted their traditions orally (p. 289). Such vague and romantically biased statements might be made of any pre-modern, non-literate human populations.

As with the Greek and Roman traditions, the treatment of non-classical religions as clearly definable units casts aside the intricacy of ancient beliefs and practices. For example, in her contribution on the Old Norse religion Britt-Mari Näsström mentions that the Roman worldview had some influence in the North on the form of the runic alphabet and the composition of the Norse pantheon. However, in recent scholarship it has been stressed that the effects were actually much more fundamental. Only in the hybridising encounter with Roman culture did the Norse worldview become systematised (c.f., Anders Andréén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudevere, *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, Nordic Academic Press, 2006).

Each article in the compilation is followed by a list of suggested reading, but all references have been collected into one list placed at the end of the book. This is not a functional approach for a handbook, where

a separate list of references would allow the reader to glance at the sources of individual chapters. Another problem is the sparseness of illustrations. For example, the chapter on d'Errico takes as its focus the stone human figure from Berekhat Ram, but there are no photographs or drawings of the artefact.

The compilation provokes mixed feelings. It is valuable, as the editors argue, because many articles address topics that are inaccessible to an international readership. Some contributions, however, are problematic because of their catalogue-like approach. This is largely evidenced by the research traditions that do not acknowledge the more conceptual or structural aspects of religions, whereas the chapters in the first section of the book, the articles by Veikko Anttonen on prehistoric Finnish religions, and Håkan Rydving on the Sámi religion, are well thought through. This reflects the fact that many archaeologists are unfamiliar with religious studies, yet are the only ones who understand the sources.

**Visa Immonen**

Getty Research Institute,  
Los Angeles, USA

Visa Immonen is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and Assistant Professor in Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology, University of Turku. Email: vialim@utu.fi

**James L. Cox (ed.):** *Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 202 pp.

*Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions* is the apt title of this book edited by James L. Cox. Much like his monographs, *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (2007) and the recent *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (2014), this anthology opens new ground and new paths for students of religions. I can think of only two other anthologies that can in some way match this in the field that it at once addresses and describes. These are *Beyond Primitivism* (2004), edited by Jacob K. Olupona, and *Indigenous Diasporas and Dislocations* (2005), edited by Graham Harvey and Charles D. Thompson Jr. Scholarship was significantly advanced by these publications because the contributors and the editors cast and framed their questions, approaches, and perspectives in unexpected ways. Now, almost ten years later, Cox and his team further develop the subject.

As a whole, the book pushes boundaries in challenging stereotypes, conveys a critical yet open attitude, and oozes inquisitiveness. Its multiplicity of approaches and perspectives is among its major strengths, as is its thorough treatment of a wide range of empirical cases that warrants grounded and contextualised discussion. By allowing methodological, theoretical, and empirical diversities to thrive,

the editor has encouraged the different contributors to stimulate and challenge each other discreetly and effectively. The tensions and complexities within and between the articles are wonderfully enriching.

The book's focal category, 'indigenous religions', is used in contrasting ways by its authors. Graham Harvey's pleas (p. 19) that they should not be 'box[ed]... up' and that there is a need to 'be clear that "indigenous religions" are not just one thing' have been realised. I have identified at least three different uses of the category 'indigenous religions' in the book: (1) as a *class of religions*; (2) as a *relational category*; and (3) as an *ethno-political marker*. Each of these uses has its own internal variations, and in most of the essays there are significant overlaps between two or even all three. Let me offer some examples of each, which will also allow me to comment on the contributions I found most striking.

The definition of 'indigenous religions' as a *class of religions* is most clearly and ambitiously undertaken by Cox himself in the opening chapter. Building on the monumental work he did in *From Primitive to Indigenous*, where he defines indigenous religions as kinship-oriented and related to a specific geographical location, he here moves on to discuss his definition in light of competing theories of indigeneity. Using the Shona of Zimbabwe and Australian debates as examples, he identifies critical problems with the anthropologists Alan Barnard's

and Justin Kendrick's use of the term 'indigenous' as primarily denoting those who are the original inhabitants of a particular location. Self-designation is another much used criterion, fronted for example in many legal frameworks, but Cox maintains that this is too vague and prone to much modern manipulation. A third delineation he considers is those 'who have been the subject of colonization and who as a result have become marginalized in society' (p. 15). Against this, he argues that many African practices, which he counts as indigenous because they are kinship-oriented and restricted to specific geographical locations, never succumbed to colonisation but have instead continued to be widespread and powerful in society. He concludes that each of these approaches to the question of indigeneity 'makes the study of what is meant by indigenous religions unclear, vague and difficult to test empirically' (p. 16).

Cox maintains that his own definition, by contrast, is universally applicable, empirically based, and fruitful, therefore, as a heuristic apparatus for studies of religions. 'On my analysis,' he states, 'in accordance with a scientific method, no matter which cases are being considered, the religious belief and practices of any community can be designated as indigenous only if their central belief focuses on ancestors and their primary identity is defined by its relation to a specific geographical location' (p. 13). Cox also offers a refreshingly reflexive history of institutional develop-

ments in the study of religions and, as part of this, a history of his own professional thinking and acting. He gives an account of the development of his thinking over the years, and of the institutional processes of establishing 'indigenous religions' as a field in its own right within the study of religions. He succeeds in paying tribute to his forerunners and teachers, while also questioning their thoughts and actions through sophisticated methodological and theoretical reflections grounded in his own empirical studies.

It is quite clear that there is a double edge to much of Cox's work, and this is also the case here. On one hand, this is about critical scholarship that aims to break new intellectual ground. On the other, it is about disciplinary and institutional politics. There are certainly tight bonds between these two fronts and activities, and Cox has been extraordinarily proficient both in innovating scholarship and in making space for particular kinds of religious studies. Nevertheless, it is tempting to ask whether these two enterprises are always fully compatible when a maximum outcome is pursued in both fields. Is it not the case that playing on recognisable and somewhat clear-cut schemas is often a great advantage, if not a prerequisite, for success in politics? To operate with a class of religions like 'indigenous religions' while maintaining for the most part a comfortable distinction with Christianity, for example, may do wonders in winning over theologians. But

does it always fare as well in critical research that aims both to break boundaries and study boundary making?

Towards the end of his essay Cox speaks about pragmatics – an unavoidable matter that always comes with a cost. His diplomatic skills and pragmatic approach have doubtless been crucial for his achievement in establishing and promoting ‘indigenous religions’ as a field in its own right within the study of religions, not only at the University of Edinburgh but also internationally. In any case, when addressing such a huge, complex, diverse, and dynamic empirical field it is essential to draw some lines to create a stable platform from which to theorise. With his astute insights Cox has opened new heuristic starting points for further critical research and the still necessary battle for disciplinary accommodation.

In several of the essays that follow Cox’s opening chapter the authors use approaches and perspectives that go beyond, or provide alternatives to, his methodological framework. The contributors have been allowed to let their various critical reflections arise more from their struggles with their cases than from some preconceived or enforced theoretical agenda.

Some, like Ulrich Berner, struggle with several empirical cases. This explains his unease with dominant models of types of religion. He questions models that operate with a rigid divide between kinship-based and universal religious traditions.

Having examined examples from a variety of times, places, and traditions, Berner concludes (p. 60) that ‘it appears that a total break with the indigenous religious tradition as, for instance, ancestor veneration, is quite a normal condition for conversion to a universal religion’, although in some cases ‘it appears that there are strategies of avoiding such a break by shifting the boundaries of the religious field and/or abolishing boundaries within the religious field’. He ends his essay with a proposal and a remark concerning methodology:

‘Classifying types of religiosity, as an alternative or at least a complement to the classification of religions, would have the advantage of not being derived from the mainstream version of the various religious traditions. Kinship-based religiosity, for instance, may be found also in a universal religious tradition, though not very likely at the centre or in a dominating position [...] In any case, it is not the task of the history of religions to follow the mainstream version of the respective religious tradition, nor to subscribe to its concept of universality.’ (p. 62)

Uses of ‘indigenous religion’ as a *relational category* are found, for example, in Suzanne Owen’s and Sabine Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz’s articles. I find Owen’s reflections about whether and how contemporary Druidry might count as an indigenous religion especially excit-



ing. Inspired by the thinking of Vine Deloria Jr., Owen writes:

'If an indigenous religion can be defined as that which relates to the land, the people and that which has gone before, as I propose, and if many who identify with Druidry are consciously making these connections, then Druidry could be regarded as an indigenous religion.' (p. 92)

The intentions of the practitioners are central for Owen. She also shows how her informants go about making connections in different places. When in Britain they try to relate to the land, the people, and what has gone before; when somewhere else, in America, for example, they may also try to relate to the land, the people, and what has gone before there. Owen's open and experimental approach certainly teases out some new questions: if Druids, why not also Anglicans? After all, the Anglican Church also has many members who consciously and sometimes eagerly claim that their religion and its practices relate to the land, the people, and what has gone before.

In her study of the *Huarochiri* manuscript, a Quechua text from the Andes from about 1608, Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz evinces a more classical, contextually contingent concept of 'indigenous religions': in this case, one emerging out of historical encounters in the Americas between violent, colonising, and missionizing Europeans and the oppressed members of peoples

who had long lived on American soils. "'Indigenous" religion,' she writes (p. 106) – using inverted commas only for the adjective – 'is that of the people in the country which is affected by the expansion [of the imperialist Spaniards], "common" peasants as well as Christian-trained "intellectuals".' In other words, she uses it in a historically, spatially, and perspectively contingent sense: the indigenous versus the foreigners as the generalizable relational equation, Andeans versus Spaniards as the particular empirical example.

It is also interesting that Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz notes (p. 106) 'that any indigenous religion will always be in the process of and/or the result of ideological influences, if not oppression, and thereby a kind of fusion or at least convergence with another religion', and that she states the obvious but often ignored point: 'Of course, Christianity was an indigenous religion in ancient Palestine.' Finally, her case study demonstrates how specific instances of Christian religion were indigenised and transformed as they met and merged with the transforming beliefs and practices of individuals and groups who were framed as more or less indigenous in those same encounters. As a student of the Americas I am somewhat biased, but I must confess that this text tickles me in all the right places.

Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz's empirical case is also a good example of *ethno-politics* in action. Cox also touches on this issue, but in a different contemporary context, when

towards the end of his article he offers a perceptive discussion of how his scholarly uses of the category 'indigenous religions' may both affect and reflect how the same category is used by actors in the field that he studies and about which he theorises. I would also like to draw attention to Bettina E. Schmidt's chapter, which I think provides a brilliant example of the complexities that are sometimes at play in ethno-politics, that is, in people's diverse, dynamic, and multifaceted relating to particular places, practices, and people, in this case, to *caboclos* or indigenous spirits in Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda. As her essay concludes, Schmidt says that, today, 'white Brazilians claim to belong to an African lineage and Afro-Brazilians can even stress their indigenous ancestry, if they choose to do so. As soon as we step away from an essentialist definition of identity, the diversity of human expression with regard to ethnic as well as religious identity becomes breathtaking.' (p. 141.)

Although far from absent (see, for example, Graham Harvey's chapter), scholarly uses of the category 'indigenous religions' as an ethno-political marker are perhaps less salient in this volume than one might expect. Or, rather, such uses are present differently than one might anticipate given today's ethno-political climate concerning indigenous peoples, and especially given that academia in many places has become one of the principal arenas for articulations of indigenisms.

I cannot help but wonder whether this is partly due to the book's predominantly European outlook (most contributors are Europeans, based in Europe, or educated in Europe), and even to a kind of European introspection and retrospection that I think may be identified in several of the texts. This aspect of the book is daring and critically invigorating, and it bears witness to conscious reflections about the authors' own embeddedness, their positionings, and their inheritances.

It is nonetheless striking that among the four cases from Europe – Jens Peter Schjødt on pre-Christian Scandinavian religion; Carole M. Cusack on medieval encounters between Christians and Pagans; Owen on Druidry; Emily Lyle on Indo-European religion – none deals with religions among the indigenous peoples in the far north. It is also puzzling that neither of the South American cases – the already mentioned contributions of Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz and Schmidt – is primarily about the contemporary situation of any of the many communities of indigenous peoples who claim to have lived there since time immemorial. Only the African case studies – Gemechu Jemal Geda on the Waaqeffannaa of the Oromo of Ethiopia, and Elijah Obinna on rituals and symbols among the Amasiri of Nigeria – are more or less in line with what we have come to expect from that continent in the context of this book's topic, as they focus on interaction and crossing between local or ethnic traditions and localised

versions of Christianity and Islam.

An abstraction of the sum of the book's case studies also reveals an implicit structure of temporal and geographical representation. Despite their already praised diversity, the cases may be divided, very roughly, into two groups: the first may be called the 'here then', and consists of cases drawn from within Europe with a historical focus; the second may be termed the 'there now', and consists of cases drawn from places outside Europe with a near contemporary focus. There are exceptions. Indeed, Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz provides a thought provoking case of indigenous religions in Peru in the past, an example of indigenous religions 'there then', a case that even involves Christianity. And Owen writes about Europeans in the present, about indigenous religion 'here now', although what her practitioners mainly engage in is the revival of traditions from very long ago. However, 'here then' versus 'there now' comes through as the book's grander scheme. This might have a not entirely unproblematic effect upon how readers at a more general level reflect on and locate its topic.

That said, the uses of the category of 'indigenous religions' to shed light on a variety of unusual cases produce challenging food for thought and stir up a field that has long suffered from analytical and typological uniformity. Nowhere does the book present itself as covering all or even most perspectives. Its modest tone in this respect adds

to its credibility and gravity. It goes without saying that a contemporary volume with the same title from, say, predominantly North American authors, or a group of authors studying cases mainly from Asia and Oceania, would be quite different.

I believe this book is among the most challenging of its kind. It brings the scholarly debate on what indigenous religions may usefully mean a long way forward. It is therefore a critical contribution to the study of religions at large and should be widely read.

**Bjørn Ola Tafjord**

University of Tromsø, Norway

Bjørn Ola Tafjord is Associate Professor at the Department of History and Religious Studies, University of Tromsø - The Arctic University of Norway. Email: bjorn.tafjord@uit.no

**Anna Sun:** *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 244 pp.

In the last two or three decades scholars have been increasingly interested in the constructions of 'religion'. Some have explored the scholarly uses of the category of religion, while others have written historical analyses of how a particular tradition or formation came to be understood as 'religious'. One strand in these studies has focused on the category of 'world religion' – how it is constructed, when it was constructed, and with what purpose. Hinduism and Buddhism have been typical examples. Confucianism has been a special case because its status as a 'religion' has never been established beyond early constructions in nineteenth century Western scholarship. For example, the earliest formulations of Confucianism in general date back to 1862, and it was named as the ancient religion of China by James Legge in 1877, but, even today, the Chinese government does not classify it as a religion. Anna Sun has taken on the twofold task of studying both the historical construction of Confucianism as a religion (and a world religion) and recent Chinese attempts to claim its status as a religion.

The initial critical thought concerning the historical task is the question of repetition: Lionel Jensen's *Manufacturing Confucianism* was published in 1997. In his study Jensen argued that Confucianism

was predominantly created on the basis of the Jesuits' encounters with the Chinese people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fortunately, Sun clarifies the difference between her study and Jensen's in her preface. She argues that these early constructions were perhaps solidifying teachings of Confucius, but the ways in which Western scholars have viewed Confucianism as a world religion are much later constructions, and their sources of origin are different from the Jesuits' constructions of the teachings of Confucius.

If Jensen's examination deals with earlier times, Sun's study focuses on the latter part of the nineteenth century, particularly on the writings and other work of Friedrich Max Müller and James Legge. This is especially true for the first part of the study, which traces the historical formation of Confucianism as a religion in Western scholarship, especially at Oxford, where both Müller and Legge worked. Legge argued against some scholars that Confucianism was a religion, and it was included in Müller's classification of eight world religions in 1891. This was followed by the convening of the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where Confucianism was represented among other 'world religions'. The historical formation of Confucianism as a religion is therefore deeply connected with the history of comparative religion, whose legitimacy was one of the reasons for the inclusion of Confucianism in the category

of religion. This process was not limited to Europe, but also affected China's discourse on religion.

Confucianism was regarded as a religion in Western scholarship, and later by activists in China, before the Communists took power in 1949 and established the current system in which Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam are considered religions. This is contrary to the situation in Indonesia and Hong Kong, where Confucianism is part of the official classification of religion: but what is the current situation in China? The second part of the book examines this in asking 'Who are the Confucians in China?' This part has a chapter on textbooks, surveys, and conversions, and is less tightly connected with the study's other parts, but it is still interesting reading. Sun offers a brief survey of whether Confucianism is included in American academic curricula today and whether Confucianism is part of the introductory textbooks of world religions. This would have been more relevant if it had been extended beyond the US and American Amazon's ten bestselling world religion books. Furthermore, it does not contribute much to the main question of the book's second part, the second chapter of which, the analysis of the surveys, demonstrates how difficult it is to say anything definitive about Confucians. For example, it is not easy to say how many there are in China. While many people participate in ancestral worship, only twelve people out of a sample of 7021 claimed to be 'Confucians'

in a survey. Furthermore, Confucian practices are not exclusive; people may also participate in 'Buddhist' or 'Christian' practices and see no contradiction. The third chapter of part II, 'To Become a Confucian', was originally written for a book about conversion. It lists various criteria according to which someone might be said to have become a Confucian – from the worshipping of Confucius to somewhat loose criteria such as participation in ritual practices at an ancestral temple or at a grave and practising the Confucian virtues – but the overall point is that the concept of conversion as an analytical tool arises from a very different discursive tradition.

The third and final part pays more attention to present day China and asks 'Is Confucianism a religion in China today?' It charts the most recent struggles of Confucianism in the first years of the twenty-first century. There have been attempts to revitalise Confucianism as an identity by various actors from professors to television personalities, including an attempt to establish it as a state religion in China to provide a backbone for a good and just society against the post-socialist spread of Christianity. The current situation, according to examples given by Sun, is complex and far from a settled issue: on the one hand, claiming Confucianism as a religion might marginalise those who make the claim, but provide protection and recognition at the same time; on the other, not classifying Confucianism as a religion opens opportunities for

stronger integration in state institutions and protection under the label 'national heritage' in a politically relatively antireligious China, but this includes the possibility that it is left unrecognised.

One of the study's missed opportunities is that Sun fails to consistently locate her excellent research on the Western construction of Confucianism as a religion, and the revitalised Chinese claims about Confucianism as a religion, in a wider framework of studies on the category of religion. In other words, she focuses on the question of whether it is legitimate to classify Confucianism as a religion, but does not use it as grounds for questioning the category of religion as such. This could have been done by locating the study more strongly within the critical histories of the category of religion. There are some passing references to the writings of Talal Asad, Russell T. McCutcheon, Jonathan Z. Smith, and especially of Tomoko Masuzawa, but not to the works of Daniel Dubuisson and Timothy Fitzgerald, to name two scholars whose studies would have been helpful in a reflection on whether religion is a primarily Western colonial construct and tool for the formation of nation-states, as well as on how various people and groups promote their interests in classifying Confucianism.

My criticism is exemplified when she writes, for example, about the possibility of Confucianism becoming 'a real religious force' (p. xvi), 'the reality of Confucian religious life

in China' (p. xiv), 'China's ritual-rich religious life' (p. 2), and 'a revival of diverse religious ritual practices' (p. 2). These are all examples of an assumption that there is such a thing as 'religion', which it would have been possible for the study to have framed as a case to demonstrate the ongoing historical constructions of the category of religion, not simply as a study of whether Confucianism is itself a religion. Despite this, the study is highly relevant reading for scholars interested in the formation of comparative religion as an academic discipline and the ongoing struggles concerning the category of 'religion'. As I read it, it demonstrates, in part against the author's intention, that the question of what is done when something is classified either as a religion or a non-religion is more interesting than the question of whether something is a religion or not.

**Teemu Taira**

University of Helsinki, Finland

Teemu Taira is senior lecturer at the Department of Study of Religions, University of Helsinki. Email: teetai@utu.fi

## Contributors

STEFAN ARVIDSSON is Professor in the History of Religions at the School of Cultural Sciences, Linnæus university, Sweden.

E-mail: stefan.arvidsson@lnu.se

OLAV HOVDELIEN is Associate Professor at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. E-mail: olav.hovdelien@hioa.no

VISA IMMONEN is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and Assistant Professor in Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology, University of Turku. Email: vialim@utu.fi

PETER JACKSON is Professor of History of religions at Stockholm University, Sweden. E-mail: peter.jackson@rel.su.se

SUSANNE OLSSON is Professor of History of religions at Stockholm University, Sweden. E-mail: susanne.olsson@rel.su.se

LEIF ERIK STENBERG is Professor in Islamology and director for Centre for Middle Eastern studies at Lund University.

E-mail: leif.stenberg@cme.lu.se.

JONAS SVENSSON is Associate Professor in the Study of Religion at the School of Cultural Sciences, Linnæus University, Sweden.

E-mail: jonas.svensson@lnu.se

BJØRN OLA TAFJORD is Associate Professor at the Department of History and Religious Studies, University of Tromsø - The Arctic University of Norway. Email: bjorn.tafjord@uit.no

TEEMU TAIRA is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Study of Religions, University of Helsinki. Email: teetai@utu.fi

DAVID THURFJELL is Professor in the Study of Religions at the School of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University.

E-mail: [david.thurfjell@sh.se](mailto:david.thurfjell@sh.se)