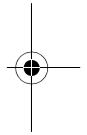
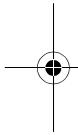




Relative, Contingent, Determined: The Category “History” and Its Methodological Dilemma

Kocku von Stuckrad

HANS KIPPENBERG CONCLUDES the introduction to the American edition of his new book with the following sentences: “The book aims at reintroducing the category of ‘history’ into religious studies. This seems necessary. Recently two volumes appeared identifying crucial notions on religious studies. Examining the concepts in the two volumes, I was struck by the absence of both ‘history’ and ‘tradition’ from each; ironically, only ‘modernity’ has survived. This seems to be a good starting point for the present study” (2002: xii).¹ Indeed it is. And it might be a key not only to Kippenberg’s study but also to a more general analysis of contemporary discourse on “religions” and their “history.” Those general—and I hasten to admit, quite basic—considerations are the issue of my essay. I will pick up the question raised by Kippenberg, why the category “history” has largely disappeared from scholarly theorizing on religion, especially in U.S. publications. There must be good reasons for this, I assume, and some of them have to do with recent reflections on the contingency of religious studies and—more generally—the relativity of scholarly meanings, which leave no room for long-lasting tradition or history beyond social constructions that change from day to day (as is



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¹ The two books Kippenberg refers to are Taylor; and Braun and McCutcheon. His critique is explained in Kippenberg 2001.

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argued by McCutcheon). But is this the end of the story? Isn't there another aspect, which simply becomes *invisible* by focusing on the contingent characteristics of scholarly meanings? Isn't there something like the "normative force of facts" that is independent of people's meanings and at the same time determines them?

The relation between those two aspects takes the form of a classic dilemma. Hence, in my analysis of the problem I shall deal with both horns of the dilemma separately. In the final section I shall raise the question of whether we can deal with the "history of religion" without being gored by one of the two horns.

THE HORN OF ESSENTIALISM

As is well known, *history* is one of the most important terms in nineteenth-century philosophy and science. It became a master key for interpreting past and present events and setting them in a context of *meaning*, albeit in quite different ways. While Christian and Jewish authors still clung to older concepts of salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*, which means that God is the driving force behind mundane developments and the history of religions is a revelation of a primordial divine plan), others took the position that history is a powerful process of human development into freedom, enlightenment, reason, democracy, or whatever. For them, this process is not initiated by a divine being. It is the inevitable result of the axiomatic conditions of humanity or the dialectics of events. Hence, it is a principle in itself, set aside from the mere causal patterns of politics or public action. It is a key to interpret *world history* or, as many authors put it, *universal history*.

Hegel played a decisive role in this development. In his view history is a process of continuous evolution of transcendental metaphysical truths. In history the "Absolute Mind"—*der Absolute Geist*—becomes conscious of itself. This optimistic and teleological concept was shared by other philosophers of idealism, even when they, like Schelling, put it the other way round and said that the transcendental Absolute was not "ready" in the beginning and just displays its perfection through historical processes but that the Absolute will be the final result of history. (By the way, Schelling is an example of the deep impregnation of philosophy with religious ideas, for he described universal history in cabbalistic terms and spoke of *zimzum* and restoration.)

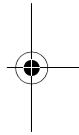
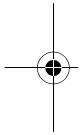
The idea that history is not just an analytical term but a powerful and active force in itself leads to what I call the essentialist position toward history. Very much like the Roman goddess Tuchê, who turns her affection quite arbitrarily to various political or military parties, from this



perspective history turns out to be a personalized entity or an ontological category, which is located in a metaphysical and transcendent realm, only describable through inductive interpretation of mundane events. History (small h) becomes History (capital H). The powerful impact of this essentialist position on the methodological instruments prominent in religious studies can hardly be overestimated. It is traceable in the idea of the “sacred,” for instance. For many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars the sacred is a category *sui generis*, an almost personalized entity that “shows itself” in epiphanies and thus makes transcendent truths visible in profane contexts. When Wilhelm Dilthey says that only history tells man what he is, he seems to think of history as a person too. It might be trivial, but let us not forget: History tells us nothing because history does not talk. Only people talk. The same problem is discernible in Mircea Eliade’s idealization of the primordial state of religious innocence that was contaminated by humanity’s “fall into history.” Again, history is ontologized as an active force, in this case a force throwing humankind into the abyss of terror, estranged from spiritual purity *in illo tempore*.

Now, one thing seems clear today: After the linguistic turn, the pragmatic turn, and in light of the “writing culture” debate, we cannot follow this path any longer. The essentialist position has come under fierce attack; it has been deconstructed from different perspectives. Focusing on science as text, the talk of “history” turned out to be little more than the subjective construction of a single author, eventually supported by a small peer group, led by a rhetoric of plausibility and the tropes of academic presentation. Focusing on science as discourse, the talk of “history” appears as being part of a legitimization of power and suppression. If we follow Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous dictum, “*There is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (xi), then it will be difficult to use the term *history* or even the term *tradition* in a way that claims objectivity.

So far, so good. What is striking, though, is the fact that in religious studies the impression that history is nothing more than construction led to the term’s complete abandonment. This desertion goes along with a disregard of discussions in other disciplines, especially within historiography itself. During the last two decades historians have been wrestling with the methodological difficulties of essentialism in a highly sophisticated way. In their search for avoiding the hazards of nineteenth-century historiography without leaving their profession altogether, they put forward new theories that are worth considering for scholars of religion as well. This is true for the work of Reinhart Koselleck, Paul Ricoeur, Jan Assmann, and Jörn Rüsen, all of them working on the principles of generating historical meaning (*historische Sinnbildung*). But before





I come back to those lines of argument, I want to dwell a bit on the price we shall have to pay if we leave the term *history* behind. We then rush right into the dilemma's second horn, which I call the horn of contingency.

THE HORN OF CONTINGENCY

When we abandon the use of history as an analytical instrument, we are likely to confuse the narration of the past with its invention and the construction of a story with its mere imagination. The reason for this is simply that we do not have any reliable—intersubjective—data that might allow for an *explanation* of certain historical phenomena. Hence, we do not have any criteria to distinguish a good story from a bad one. Pragmatists might argue here that, in fact, we do have criteria, but these emerge from the discourse of the day and not from any historical “truth.” In so doing, though, they implicitly still cling to the traditional academic patterns of discussion and argument because the “discourse of the day” is not fully arbitrary but, rather, the result of academic customs.

Related to the lack of data is another issue worth mentioning. Without a category like history or tradition, how can we come to terms with phenomena of permanence, endurance, and continuity? We are no longer able to explain the *longue durée* of religious, political, or sociological developments. We are not able to cope with the impression that there are elements in historical phenomena that are remarkably constant, not only patterns of thought or habit but also concrete lines of tradition, which serve as “momentum of inertia” in historical processes or even—as was elaborated in the Annales school—as the prison of mind (see Febvre; Kula; cf. Honegger; le Goff, Chartier, and Revel). To be sure, those phenomena are not the same in different contexts, but they are related in a specific way, which can only be scrutinized by means of “tradition” and “history.” And what is more, for any construction of identity—especially in the field of religion—people refer to long-standing traditions and use them to separate themselves from other groups (see Kippenberg and von Stuckrad: 136–164). History and tradition are crucial arguments in the arena where identities are negotiated, and it seems impossible to analyze those discourses without having an elaborated academic concept of history at hand.

Such are the hazards of the dilemma's second horn. Either we do not explain *anything*, or, if we try to, we smuggle those assumptions into our explanation that we were trying to avoid.

Now, having been trapped in this dilemma, what can we make of it? Is there a chance to take the bull by its horns or to jump beyond the methodological pitfalls that are found on the fields of history and tradition?



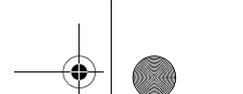
In my opinion (not surprisingly) there is a chance to cope with the difficulties I have described. To do so, we can be guided both by current theories of historiography—I have alluded to that already—and by making use of older concepts that were elaborated in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

BEYOND THE DILEMMA

It is not only today that historians have been aware of the constructive elements in their narration of the past. Nineteenth-century scholars hotly debated the issue of subjectivity and objectivity as well as the problem that we have to choose from a huge amount of data those facts that seem to fit into our presentation. This highly precarious but nonetheless inescapable methodological process was known as *reductionism*. In the early twentieth century the discussion was pushed forward by the seminal works of philosophers and sociologists, among them Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. Although they refer to *history* and *tradition* as critical terms of interpreting past and present, they were not running into the problems of essentialism because they reflected on their own role in narrating history and took the contingencies and limitations of their positions into account. To illuminate this, one may quote the first two sentences of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. In his foreword (written in 1920) he introduces the reader to his main question thus:

Problems of universal history will be dealt with by the son of the modern European cultural world unavoidably and justifiably under the question: What sequence of circumstances led to the fact that on occidental grounds in particular, and only there, emerged cultural phenomena, which laid—at least as we like to imagine it—in a direction of developments towards *universal* significance and validity? Only in the occident there exists "*science*" in that state of development, which we today accept as "valid." (1)

These two sentences contain a cornucopia of methodological precautions that have gone largely unnoticed after Weber and were recovered by critical theory only recently. First, Weber claims ethnocentricity—quite like Richard Rorty today—as an unavoidable yet at the same time justified limit of scholarly perception. Second, he reminds the reader of ethnicity's subjective and contingent desire to imagine universal validity in terms of its own tradition. And, third, Weber allows the scholar to generalize local and temporally limited phenomena ("we today") into something of universal validity, although this is a *circulus vitiosus*, for what turns out to be "valid" depends on what had been defined as "valid" beforehand.



At first sight, that seems to be a lapse in his argument. But in light of the dilemma I have described it might be a pragmatic way to shun the consequences of essentialism, on the one hand, and the impossibility of historic narrative, on the other. In my opinion there are strong arguments for this position. The most important one has to do with frankness. The answer to the dilemma is *making it explicit*. As Robert Brandom has argued in his important study of that title, there is no chance to escape the normative functions of speech and discourse; even when we take a radically relativistic stand, this stand implicitly carries normative judgements and preconceived rulings. Thus, the best way to deal with that problem—or, rather, to “democratize” the discussion—is not the evasion of biased terms but, rather, their reflexive use. This holds true in particular when we do not have a less biased alternative term in stock, as is the case with *history* and *tradition*.

Also important is another consequence. Responsible for a lot of misunderstandings in contemporary debates of religious studies is, at least in my opinion, a confusion of the methodological functions of the term *history* (or, in logical words, the term’s syntactic category). This is because of the disregard of models and concepts that have been elaborated within the confines of historiography. As I have already noted, the discussion of generating historical meaning (*historische Sinnbildung*) is of particular importance (see Kippenberg and von Stuckrad: 37–48). Kippenberg in his book refers to Paul Ricoeur, Reinhart Koselleck, and Hayden White. I want to add a model established by historian Jörn Rüsen. He distinguishes three elements that together constitute historical meaning—levels of contents, of formal construction, and of function. With regard to contents, historiography has to make sure that the (re)presented past really has empirical grounding, that is, the story told must be recognized as factitious by the recipients. The formal element simply calls for the logical plausibility of the story, for instance, in its details’ temporal relations. The functional level, finally, points to the high significance for contemporary discourse because the practical application of the presented past is always an inherent part of the narration. In Rüsen’s words:

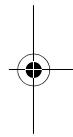
Historical meaning (*Sinn*), hence, is divided in the three components of the empirical, of interpretation, and of orientation. All three refer to the past in a communicated temporal distance to the present. . . . “Meaning” [appears] as an adequate term for the coherence that is crucial in this relationship [between past and present]. Meaning is the integration of all three components. They have to refer to one another, converge in one another, and enhance one another. . . . The integration is practically realized and applied in narrative operations. Meaning in narrative is the



red thread the story follows: it is generated by the respective cultural pattern of interpretation. (36)

It is not my intention here to judge whether Rösen's threefold system can really go unchanged. My point is that his approach is an example of the possibility of arriving at a coherent theory of history that does not hide its constructive elements and nonetheless is able to correlate facts of the past with their (re)presentation in the present under a broad concept of history. *History*, in this perspective, is an analytical term that does not explain anything in itself. It is located on a different level of argument. It is a metaterm needed for interpretation at the interface of past and present. It should not be mixed up with the "facts" themselves—which would lead to essentialism—but, rather, should be regarded as a reminder that there are facts "out there" that influence our positions or even determine our concepts.

Applying "history" in such a way means to get the facts and the data—contrasting Smith's notion—back into the boat. "History" is a set of facts that happen and call for explanation. Hence, our interpretations, contingent and relative as they are, are determined by facts that simply happen and are not manipulated or even understood by ourselves. Let me close with Sam D. Gill and his remark that "writings of the academic study of religion must also be demonstrably grounded in the reality of the subject. Without this grounding, what we do is finally not academic at all" (460).



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