

Transformation of Religion

Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society

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Interdisciplinary Perspectives



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Table of Contents

Foreword	VII
<i>Christian Danz/Jakob Helmut Deibl</i>	
Transformation of Religion: An Introduction	IX
<i>Christian Danz/Jakob Helmut Deibl</i>	
1. The Dimensional Model of Religion: Its Use in History of Religions, Comparative Religion, and in Defining Religion	1
<i>Hans Gerald Hödl</i>	
2. Historicizing and Deconstructing “Religion”: A Short Overview of a Persisting Problem	19
<i>Nickolas P. Roubekas</i>	
3. Differentiating the Social Dimension of Religion: On the Heuristic Potential of a Three-Level Concept of Religion	35
<i>Karsten Lehmann</i>	
4. Transformation Processes in the Religion of Ancient Israel	57
<i>Marianne Grohmann</i>	
5. Religion, <i>dīn</i> , and Islam: A Complex Web	75
<i>Rüdiger Lohlker</i>	
6. Post-Secular Feminist Research: The Concept of “Lived” Religion and Double Critique	87
<i>Sabine Grenz</i>	
7. An Account of Behavioural Biology on the “Concept of Religion”	111
<i>Martin Fieder</i>	
8. Religion and Communication: On the Foundation of a Concept of Religion in the Philosophy of Religion	119
<i>Christian Danz</i>	

9. **The Concept of Religion in the Context of Aesthetics** 133
 Jakob Helmut Deibl

10. **Political Religion: Transformation of a Political Concept
 and Its Ethical Consequences** 163
 Ingeborg G. Gabriel

List of Contributors 181

Index 187

Foreword

The present volume “Transformation of Religion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” is the result of a workshop of the same title of the Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” (RaT) of the University of Vienna, which took place digitally on 2 February 2021 and served the centre’s members self-understanding of transformations in the study of religion from their respective disciplinary perspectives.

We would like to thank the speakers for making their contributions available to us for publication. Without the active support of Ms Hannah Bleckenwegner and Ms Noemi Call (both Vienna), the volume would not have been completed so quickly. Our thanks are extended to them as well as to the publishing house BRILL for the usual good cooperation.

Vienna, December 2022

*Christian Danz
Jakob Helmut Deibl*

Transformation of Religion: An Introduction

Christian Danz/Jakob Helmut Deibl

As society and culture change, so does religion and its descriptions. This is what makes the scientific observation of modern religion so complex. The representations and recordings of religion depend on understandings of religion that are themselves not only bound to a certain perspective, but also undergo change. While until the 1980s social science interpreters of the development of religion in modern society still assumed religion's dissolution in the maelstroms of modernisation,¹ in the 21st century they have drawn completely different pictures, which are characterized by a return of religion.² Whether the verdict is that religion is disappearing or returning, either diagnosis presupposes an understanding of what religion is. Otherwise, neither its disappearance nor its return in modern culture could be registered. But precisely the question of what religion is – as the countless attempts to define it in religious studies, social sciences and theologies quickly make clear – is controversial.³ This dilemma has to do with the fact that the concept of religion is a product of European histories of religion.

Religion in the sense of a general concept, as it is almost taken for granted in the global discourses of the 21st century, only emerged and took shape in the age of the European Enlightenment. The concept of religion as an encapsulation of the many religious traditions around the world was just as unknown to earlier ages as it is to other cultures today. The ancient term *religio* in its two forms – *relegere* and *religare* – means the worship of gods in cultic practice, but not religion in the modern understanding of the term. *Religio* does not function to designate other 'religions', and instead difference and foreignness are marked in antiquity with terms such as heresy, sect or ethnicity.⁴ It is only since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that, through complex processes, an understanding of religion has developed, which now no longer refers only to the *religio christiana*, but is extended to the religion of Jews and Muslims and 'pagans'.⁵ These each now have their own religion. Alongside the Renaissance thinkers, the new understanding of religion as a general concept,

1 Cf. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*.

2 Cf. Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*; Casanova, *Europas Angst vor der Religion*.

3 See also the contributions by Hans Gerald Hödl and Karsten Lehmann in this volume.

4 Cf. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*.

5 Cf. Smith, *Religion, Religions, Religious*, pp. 179–196.

encompassing various forms of the religious and its articulation, owes much to so-called English Deism. Religion, according to representatives of English Deism, is intrinsic to human being's endowment of reason, and this natural religion is the basis of historical religions. This view creates a model that is taken up and continued in the Enlightenment and in the philosophies of religion that emerged at the end of the 18th century. Religion now becomes a separate, independent dimension of human life, distinct from other cultural forms. The difference between religion and culture is just as constitutive for the modern understanding of religion as the conviction that an identical religious essence underlies the various religious traditions of the world. In the historical religions, this core merely presents itself in different images and symbols. Although these differ in their historical forms, they share a common religious essence.

In the 19th century, European colonialism and global exchange processes led to the universalisation of this European understanding of religion, forming the basis for the invention of world religions. The concept of religion makes it possible to grasp and compare complex heterogeneous traditions by making them uniform and imagining them as religious communities analogous to Christianity. Religion, according to the conviction of the academic interpreters of religion in the 19th century, belongs to the *human condition*. Every human being is religious by nature. This religion, already inherent in the human being, articulates itself in historical images and symbols that owe their existence to the cultural context and its transformations. But the actual religion is something internal, not accessible from the outside and unique to one's own religious experience. What one sees are merely the adaptable forms in which the invariant inner religion is articulated and symbolised. Compared to the intangible inner religion, the images through which it presents itself are secondary. They belong to the unessential surface level.

This concept of religion is a modern construct that owes its origins to European histories of religion. The question is whether it can be applied to any extent to other cultures that know neither such a concept nor the distinctions that constitute it.⁶ Moreover, although the concept of religion assumes that different religions have developed historically, it has a tendency to monistically reduce and ultimately to reject their diversity.⁷ In many religions, the same religious object presents itself, suggesting that the historical forms of the various religions are negligible and unimportant. What is important is the common

6 See also the contributions by Marianne Grohmann, Rüdiger Lohlker and Nickolas P. Roubekas in this volume.

7 Cf. the contribution by Christian Danz in this volume.

religious essence. A general concept of religion is associated with a uniformity of religious diversity. These and similar aspects have increasingly led to criticism of a general concept of religion in the religion-related sciences since the 1980s.⁸ Religion is a Western construct, one which has played a role in domination and European colonialism. In order to prevent the perpetuation of this tendency, a concept of religion in the sciences of religion should be dispensed with. But what other concept could take its place? In the global discourses on religion, this term has prevailed; it is used not only in academic debates but also has established itself in everyday language.⁹

The retention of the concept of religion as an analytical descriptive element is only possible if the methodological problems associated with it are taken into account. This means, first of all, that the framework of the concept of religion must be made transparent. Moreover, the sciences concerned with religion have become increasingly differentiated since the 20th century. Just as there is no single concept of religion, there is currently no single methodological perspective on religion. Under the conditions of complex modern societies, their attendant accelerated transformation dynamics, globalisation, etc., religion can no longer be adequately captured by one academic discipline. What is needed is a synthesis of diverse methodological approaches to the phenomenon of religion.¹⁰ How this can be realized in a way that is methodologically sound is still largely an open question.

In Western societies, religion has become a form of communication alongside other forms. Even if religion constructs an image of reality as a whole, the knowledge that there are other perspectives on reality, besides the religious, belongs to religion from the outset. Religion is autonomous precisely because it is self-referential, i.e., religion is responsible for religion. Thus, its image of reality fulfils a role for religion but no longer for society or culture. Admittedly, religious and social discourses overlap, and each has repercussions that are reflected in the transformation of religion.¹¹ Just as cultural and social issues are incorporated into religion, religious content is used in culture. But what does this mean for religion and its study?

Sciences concerned with religion must be able to describe the inner workings of religion. This is only possible if religious practitioners' self-perception

8 Cf. Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsgeschehen*, pp. 17–42; Bergunder, *Was ist Religion?*, pp. 3–55.

9 Cf. Suarsana, *Gott, ein Gefüge*. Cf. also the contribution by Martin Fieder in this volume.

10 The volume takes this into account by bringing together approaches to the topic of religion from different academic disciplines.

11 See the contributions by Jakob Helmut Deibl, Ingeborg G. Gabriel, and Sabine Grenz in this volume.

of their religion is included in the theoretical description. Without taking this into account, descriptions of religion tend towards functional models that assume religion even where it is not meant or intended by the participants. It is also not enough to try to grasp religion at the content level of statements, images and symbols: Since these can also be used in a non-religious sense at any time, they do not provide sufficient information about the presence of religion. A theory of religion must therefore incorporate the knowledge of religious practitioners that they are communicating religion and nothing else. However, the self-perception of religion is accessible to a science, which is not itself religion, only as a methodologically guided construction. No academic discipline can put itself in the place of its subject and claim a privileged access for itself. The study of religion must free itself from such notions, as well as from an understanding of religion that presupposes a common substance underlying all religions and from an ontological monism that assumes a reality that is represented merely in different ways by diverse cultural forms. The academic disciplines concerned with religion only arrive at a constructive understanding of religion when they grasp it as a form of truth-telling in its own right, alongside other forms, and analyse the conditions for the success of this truth-telling.¹² The task of religious studies would then indeed be to describe the inner workings of religion as religion.

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¹² Cf. Latour, *Existenzweisen*.

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