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Introduction

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Introduction

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Abstract: This first chapter serves as the reader's initial orientation to the general layout of the present work. It begins by thematizing the ineffable dynamism and complexity of the term religion as signifier. Contrary to the long-reigning secularization thesis, this single term remains deeply entrenched in a broad spectrum of discursive frameworks, traversing both popular social imaginaries as well as academic disciplinary divides. Amid this constant state of flux, one can only say with certainty that religion is here to stay. In spite of this complexity, the present edition proposes a way forward, offering a cross-section of some of these fascinating developments via an introductory interview and four thematically-organized sections; Part I: Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics – Stagnation or Change in the Authority over Religious Knowledge Production, Part II: Religion, Economics and Development – Interaction of Discursive Spheres; Part III: Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion; and IV: Religion, Politics, Power – Decentered Analyses.

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We live in a time, we teach at a time, when religions are in center stage of history, have marched into the center stage and, in the center of the stage, enact and speak. (Laurie Zoloth, 2014)

Undeniably, Religion is in motion: in the light of contemporary political climates marked by motion and change, neo-nationalist agitation, populism and demarcated identity constructions, religion plays a vibrant role. Its multifaceted and versatile character is present in the academic landscapes in the Global North and South. Its discursive signature can be traced in a variety of fields such as politics,¹ economics,² sociology³ and anthropology.⁴ In terms of key words prominently permeating and stimulating today's academic discourses about human affairs worldwide, religion is certainly among the most ubiquitous.⁵

Seen against the backdrop of a changing global world order— entanglements of inequalities and asymmetries, financial and economic crises, ethnic and religio- cultural conflicts, vicious wars and war zones, terrorism, forced flight and migration, anti-democratic and populist tendencies and an apparent shift to nationalist conservatism— religion asserts itself as one of the most frequently used buzzwords in contemporary (not only academic) discussions. Prominent examples are the Muslim ban initiated and passed by US President Trump, the seemingly insatiable will to discuss headscarves across Western European nation-states, the prominence of Islam in debates over refugees' presence and "integration" into Western European societies or the way in which gender and religion intersect in debates on religious belonging. The latter was most present in debates over the "Muslim man" emerging after incidents on New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne. Despite the often fiercely levelled attacks on religion's supposed backwardness and the necessity for a secular society, contemporary societies have also witnessed a vibrancy of emergent religious pluralisms and its contributions to a diverse and exuberant cultural life, especially in global cities.⁶

Remarkably, it is precisely in correlation with this charged and crisis-laden context that religion attracts attention from scholars across the academic spectrum.⁷ Almost notoriously, religion is strategically used in numerous different and seemingly unrelated academic discussions.⁸ Yet, the current prominence of religion in academic and intellectual knowledge production certainly did not come overnight. Attempts to explain away this discursive phenomenon in its distinct and long-term relevance as merely momentous and transient— e.g. as an epiphenomenon of Europe's ongoing refugee and migrant 'crisis' — are short-sighted to say the least. Trading under the name of a "*Return of Religion*", the signifier religion, after decades of its seeming and claimed disappearance from the public intellectual sphere, already

¹ Arnason and Karolewski (2014), Vlas and Boari (2013), Rowe (2012), Haynes (2014).

² Iyer (2016), Barro and McCleary (2003), Guiso et al. (2003).

³ Bender et al. (2013), Berger (2005).

⁴ Obadia and Wood (2011), Nussbaum (2012).

⁵ Daniel et al. (2012).

⁶ Sassen (2001).

⁷ Omer et al. (2015).

⁸ Haynes (2014).

started to announce its renaissance in the early 1990s shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain. With increasing intensity, it has spread its discursive signature ever since.⁹ This historical perspective demonstrates that the correlation—which by no means should be mistaken for a one-sided causal dependence—of a re-emerging academic interest in religion on the one hand and epochal *caesura* and transformation(s) on the other is long-standing and persistent with nothing pointing to its foreseeable end.

However, just below the surface of the discursive relevance of the term religion across disciplinary divides also lies a rich polyvalence of its meaning, often polarizing and rarely undisputed. Not least, these disputes and discrepancies in content and intent have tended to crystalize along inter and intra-disciplinary divides to such an extent that the question of what religion signifies becomes largely a function of who invokes it and towards what end. Moreover, religion is not only a prominent discursive category, but as a phenomenon undergirds institutional, communal, political, social and economic realities.¹⁰ Precisely because of its general significance for a myriad of discourses in all their thematic, theoretical, methodical and intentional diversity, an adequate understanding of religion has proven to be a practically inexhaustible point of contention.

Taking into account both its timeliness and relevance correlative to a drastically changing or actually crumbling world order as well as its complexity and controversiality, religion calls for a transcultural as well as transdisciplinary synergy of perspectives.¹¹ A useful tool guiding such collective efforts of mediation can be the basic idea that the signifier religion, beyond all given contextual differences, stands for an institutionally and/or habitually stabilized dealing with the inevitability of human creation of meaning specifically in its ultimate radicality.¹² In that sense religious discourses and knowledge production are asking and answering ultimately radical questions such as: “What is?”, “what *should be*?” and “what *will come*?” etc. Against this conceptual backdrop, the correlation of the discursive reappearance of religion with historical shifts of epochal significance is not contingent on religion but rather an irreducible part of its constitution.

To create and catalyse synergies of perspectives concerning the study of religion, the “*Religion, Knowledge, Discourse*” (RKD) doctoral programme of Humboldt- Universität zu Berlin organized a conference entitled “*Religion – Bridging Gaps and Breaking Paths; Contemporary Approaches towards Discourses of Religion*”. The conference was designed as a transdisciplinary research laboratory; a space for junior and senior scholars from the Global North and South to bring their contextual and disciplinary diversity into constructive dialogue. In February 2017, over the course of three days, voices from a great variety of cultural and academic backgrounds explored contemporary approaches towards religion(s), the “situatedness”¹³ and contextual formation of religion and (religious) knowledge production.

⁹ Casanova et al. (1994), Beyer and Beaman (2007), Bhabra (2007), Butler et al. (2011).

¹⁰ McCutcheon (2003).

¹¹ Juergensmeyer (2003).

¹² Geertz (1973), Taylor (2007), Bergunder (2011), Gerhardt (2014).

¹³ Cf. Haraway (1988).

The present volume is the collective result of this engagement, covering a broad variety of material, which reflects a timely cross section of academic discourses on religion and beyond. The aim is to trace the discursive threads evolving around the concept of religion—which is “in motion” itself—in different contexts and from transdisciplinary perspectives. By bringing together manifold empirical and theoretical contributions the volume allows us to follow these threads and to increase our understanding of contemporary discourses of religion and knowledge production in various fields and the contemporary context they are embedded in. As such, the work can be a valuable resource to scholars engaged with the study of religion, regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

The individual contributions to this work echo the aforementioned basic idea of religion: instead of simply restating the complexity and controversiality of religion in an aporetic fashion, each chapter embraces and implements the particular potential of religion to evoke fundamental questions of human life and affairs. In the interest of accessibility, these contributions are organized according to four central themes, to which the reader may refer in accordance with his/her primary thematic interest:

(1) Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics: Stagnation or Change in the Authority over Religious Knowledge Production; (2) Religion, Economics and Development: Interaction of Discursive Spheres; (3) Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion; and (4) Religion, Politics, Power: Decentred Analyses. The editors trust that the reader will venture beyond their initial point of entry to gain an appreciation of the mutual entanglements which the contributions collectively entail.

“New and Old Gods”: In Conversation with Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek

This volume opens with a conversation between the editors and anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek. In the quiet seclusion of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, Appadurai and Lambek reflected not only on the content and experience of the conference, but on the space—the cityscape, in Appadurai’s terms—itself within which it took place. The city of Berlin, no stranger to the changing fortunes of time, finds itself once again—or still?—in a phase of considerable cultural, intellectual and economic flux. As such, one can hardly imagine a more suitable space to consider the existential concerns of the researchers in a rapidly changing world. During the conversation, Appadurai and Lambek not only expanded on the specific and changing spaces of doing research, but also on the trajectory of the researchers themselves. Trained in US-American departments of anthropology, both senior researchers reflected upon the changing conditions at universities, in the light of globalizing and neo-liberalizing forces. Together with the three junior researchers, they reflected upon the impacts of this new globalized world order and its implications for doing academic work as well as the fields of (religious) research themselves. In that sense, the conversation of “Old and New Gods” takes the conference and the city of Berlin as a starting point and relates it to current developments in social and political as well as academic life. By doing so, it presents

the often-lacking and vitally needed meta-analytical conversation on research on religion, in short on “religion in motion”.

The rare opportunity for this kind of exchange, involving the past and future of research on religion and academia, which tend to be less-openly discussed within the confines of the university, was at once cathartic and refreshing. Perhaps even more refreshing, and reassuring, was the apparent enthusiasm of the esteemed anthropologists for the city of Berlin. Drawing from experiences both past and present, the senior researchers speak openly about their cultural encounters in this city which espouses the virtues of tradition and innovation, seemingly at the same time.

Departing from the themes of our opening discussion, we then proceed to the first of our four sections.

Part I: Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics— Stagnation or Change in the Authority Over Religious Knowledge Production

In the spirit of perspectival inclusion, the first section, “*Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics*”, begins with a collection of “embodied” approaches to the study of religion; formerly marginalized perspectives exhibiting a keen awareness of the significance of gender, body, performance and even technology in religious praxis, interpretations and cultural representations and productions. As such, they present targeted challenges to traditional rigidities—orthodoxies both academic and religious. Bodily practices, and the body itself, have long been marginal to research on religion, and the same may be said about many of the voices emanating from these bodies. The feminist and queer perspectives among the contributions in this section are an enriching addition to research, not least of all because of their radical divergence from the traditional producers and enforcers of (heteronormative and androcentric) orthodoxy. As a whole, these divergent voices and approaches share a broad concern with reinterpretations and contemporary approaches to ethics, (religious) belonging, as well as transformation of theologies amid a rapidly changing world, evoking often overlooked discussions on popular culture and going beyond the Global North.

This is most explicit in the article “*Feminine Power and Agency in the Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô*”, where **Inga Scharf da Silva** takes us to the globally active religious movement of the *Umbanda*. Her multi-sited ethnography in Brazil and Berlin highlights the centrality of female priesthood and the material significance of female ownership. In so doing, her work enriches the understanding of the negotiation of gender positions inside religious communities and the way in which religious communities seek to perform resistances by way of performing, cultivating and establishing alternative ways of (religious) life and worship.

Teresa Forcades i Vila’s “*Pleasure from a Theological Perspective*” draws on the rich writings offered by Teresa of Avila. Starting from an auto-ethnographic positionality of a Benedictine nun, Forcades engages in an exciting connection between her own experiences and those of her namesake. In exploring the writings of the Saint, Forcades i Vila shows how the body,

bodily experiences, pleasure and the erotic were not absent from Christian thought, writings and the Catholic tradition, but were indeed inside of it. Drawing and engaging in Saint Teresa's historical documents and writings, Forcades i Vila connects it to her "queer theology". The latter presents an understanding of God which is in correspondence with the human body, sexuality, desire and pleasure. This sets the ground for a gender-queer theology and most pointedly overcomes traditional mind-body dualisms.

In "*Dead or Dying. Jewish Religious Cultures and Brain Death as the Modern Mind-Body Dualism*", **Sarah Werren** equally reconsiders traditional dualisms and discusses the bioethical issues of brain death and organ transplantation in relation to Jewish orthodoxy. Using this example, she demonstrates how the human body can present the centre of theological discussions and interpretations. Werren vividly shows how rabbinic discussions and interpretations are at the heart of Jewish tradition and its religious practice. Taking the body and brain death as a starting point, this article thus demonstrates that the body is central in Jewish tradition and practice and never absent from it. Connecting historical and contemporary debates over death and dying in Jewish traditions, Werren then succinctly highlights the necessity and urgency of bringing "the body back in" since it has, so she demonstrates, always been central to religion and religious practice.

Part II: Religion, Economics and Development— Interaction of Discursive Spheres

The second section, "*Religion, Economics and Development—Interaction of Discursive Spheres*", invites the reader to reconsider the increasingly untenable secular-religious dichotomy in the study of religion, economics and development. Sparked by a recent interest in development policymakers and development economists, religion (re-)entered the discursive spheres of economics and development around the turn of the century.¹⁴ Earlier contributions, such as Adam Smith's treatment of religion, Max Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Eisenstadt's notion of religion's "transformative capacity", are beginning to resurface in the development debate.¹⁵ The section focuses on the fundamental ideological presuppositions underlying discourses on socioeconomic structures and processes. These structures and processes are to a large extent rooted in discursive spheres marked by a "secular distinction": they are seen as part of a secular, or profane, realm, in contrast to a religious, or sacred, realm. This causes inherent tensions, as religion has to be conceptually secularized to fit into the categories available in these secular discourses. As religion enters (in their own perspective) secular spheres such as economics and development, friction is generated between "religious" and "secular" discourses, which each in their own right are (largely mutually exclusive) forms of creating reality through specific use of language.¹⁶ The three contributions in this section

¹⁴ Swart and Nell (2016), Ver Beek (2000).

¹⁵ Smith (1992), Weber (1958), Eisenstadt (1968).

¹⁶ Feldtkeller (2014).

focus on this field of tension from different empirical and theoretical perspectives and thereby challenge the “secular distinction” from different angles.

Celine Righi offers a conceptual treatment of the interaction of notions of sacredness and neoliberal technologies relating both to religious studies and political economy. In her contribution, *“New Technologies’ Promise to the Self and the Becoming of the Sacred: Insights from Georges Bataille’s Concept of Transgression”*, she uses George Bataille’s account of the sacred to scrutinize the self-empowerment promises of new technologies. Neoliberalism’s technological promises are juxtaposed with Bataille’s notions of eroticism in the sacred and transgression and their inherent emancipative potential against power. Righi relates this to Stiegler’s critique exploring the ambiguous relation of sacredness, magic and power within contemporary neoliberalism.

Focusing on the Haitian context, **Andrea Steinke** deconstructs binary readings of (religious) faith and (secular) professionalism in her paper *“Faith and Professionalism in Humanitarian Encounters in Post-Earthquake Haiti”*. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, her analysis of two religious development organizations, Caritas Jacmel and Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, shows the dynamic interrelation of religious identity and professionalism in humanitarian work. Humanitarians active in post-disaster Haiti, she argues, constitute “mediants that produce materialities” with transcendental underpinnings, be it religious faith or secular moral imperatives dictated by contemporary humanitarianism. Steinke highlights that faith and professionalism are not antipodes, but rather both constitute essential dimensions contributing to the impact of the work of religious development organizations.

This relates well to the article *“Religion and Sustainable Development: The ‘Secular Distinction’ in Development Policy and its Implication for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities”* by **Philipp Öhlmann, Stefan Hunglinger, Marie-Luise Frost and Wilhelm Gräb**. Using the example of German official development policy, the authors juxtapose dominant Western notions of development with views on development by religious communities in Africa and argue that notions of development constitute situated knowledge. They show that the recent discourse on “religion and development” takes place in a secular framework and thus fails to account for the perspective of the actors themselves, in whose perspective the “secular distinction” does not exist. This has implications for development policy: if development cooperation, as it claims, is to engage with religious communities at the level of values, ideas and beliefs, it must also engage with their notions of development as ends of mutual partnership.

Part III: Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion

Religion, just like any other institutionally organized formation of subjectivity, has to be able to productively relate to, regulate and (re-)form itself and its praxis. Present-day academic theologies, with their specific task of theological knowledge production, may be understood

as vehicles for the professionalized intellectual self- relation and self-regulation of religion basing on continuous knowledge transfers with other academic disciplines. As a result, academic theologies, unlike for example sociology, ethnology, psychology, philosophy or cultural studies *per definitionem* display a unique institutional double “nature”: they are both of religious as well as of academic “nature” and so is their production of knowledge. Due to their institutional intermediary positionality, however, academic theologies, more than other academic disciplines (also interested in religion), are forced to face a well-known challenge regarding the intellectual involvement with religion posing nothing less than an existential threat to them: the challenge of overcoming the basic problem of a fixed dichotomy between phenomenal-experiential and habitual insider perspectives *of* religious practitioners (‘emic’) on the one hand and academic or intellectual outsider perspectives *on* religious practitioners (‘etic’) on the other. Succeeding in this challenge is the very condition of possibility for academic theologies, for if they are unable to surmount the said dilemma, which would imply the mutual exclusion of one perspective through the other, they cannot at all or at least not properly fulfil their intermediary function. Further unfolding the basic problem of a dogmatically fixed and substantial insider–outsider disjunction unveils two main problem levels: the epistemological and, as an immediate consequence, methodological problem level and the (meta-)political problem level concerning an adequate engagement with and for religion.

Each in their own way the section’s contributions directly target the basic problem with differing respect towards its two main levels by answering the following guiding question: are there new or previously unexplored strategies or approaches to constructively bridge this dichotomy of perspectives?

In his programmatic essay, “*The Study of Religion as the Study of Discourse Construction*”, **Gerhard van den Heever** introduces an innovative option for a meta-theoretical self-description of theology as well as other disciplines (or discourses) interested in the study of religion as a justifying base of their work explicitly including religiously motivated political interventions. The concrete innovativeness of Heever’s contribution lies in the idea of a reconciliation of the divide between a phenomenological perspective and a Foucauldian discourse- analytical perspective, which Heever perceptively interprets as an echo of the insider– outsider dichotomy, through a meta-theory of scholarly production. On the basis of this meta-theory both theological and other scholarship on religion as well as religion itself can be analysed or described as discourses of world-making. That way the perspectival difference between insider and outsider is no longer a difference in kind. Consequently, the scholar of religion—if he/she sees the necessity—can interpret his/her own doing as a religious act or an act of religiously motivated (meta-)political activism.

In a theological-philosophical attempt to tackle the basic problem of a (substantial) dichotomy of perspectives from its very (logico-)metaphysical roots, **Julian Hensold’s** “*Beyond a Dichotomy of Perspectives. Understanding Religion on the Basis of Paul Natorp’s ‘Logic of Boundary’*” centrally presents Paul Natorp’s—largely unknown—late post-Neo-Kantian work on a *non*-reductionist as well as *non*-essentialist reconception of the notion of religion.

Following Natorp's "Logic of Boundary" he argues that religion neither operates "'within' nor 'beyond' the boundary" of human reason but "exactly on [or 'in'] this boundary", making religion not only accessible (meaning understandable) for but also justifiable through academic knowledge production such as theology and other humanities. Unreservedly and radically explicating "sense" as the principal medium of its own performance, academic knowledge production—*nolens volens*—has to position itself "in" the boundary of human reason and, thereby, enters the very dimension (of knowledge production) in which religion operates. As a result, the problematic inside– outside divide regarding an adequate realization of religion is sublated or mediated while at the same time religion's claim(s) of first and last positive knowledge reveal(s) as principally justified.

Part IV: Religion, Politics, Power—Decentred Analyses

In the fourth section, we explore the crucial significance of epistemic positioning in regulating the dissemination of knowledge. Ever since Michel Foucault and Edward Said became household names, the idea that discursive frameworks shape notions of power, legitimacy and authenticity has become common fare. What each contribution in this section emphasizes, however, is the role that location and positioning play in these processes. With an increased focus on the migration of knowledge, it becomes apparent that even essentially similar discourses reproduced in distinct contexts lead to vastly different, even contrary results. This applies as much to "secular" discourses posing as religious nationalism, to a French discourse on the natural sciences enlisted to make a claim for Arab-Islamic cultural renaissance, and to the reintroduction of historiographically suppressed epistemologies as a pedagogical practice.

In "*Making Global Connections: Critical Pedagogy and the Decolonization of History*", **Harun Rasiah** offers a decentred approach to critical pedagogy in undergraduate courses on Islam and modern Middle Eastern History. He begins with critical media literacy as a requisite skill for deconstructing and challenging both popular and academic representations of Islam and the Middle East. His approach is undergirded by a deep appreciation for the role of hegemonic historical narratives in the construction of political imaginaries. To the extent that students seriously engage epistemological alternatives, distinct cartographies, contextual practices of knowledge production, suppressed intellectual genealogies—they open themselves to historical alternatives, making them less reliant upon more conventional narratives for building their own intellectual orientations. Rasiah emphasizes the importance of binding knowledge to experience, which he promotes via an academic excursion of American students to Granada's Alhambra and the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba.

In "*The Function of Bachelardian Epistemology in the Post-colonial Project of M.A. al-Jabri*", **Jordan Kynes** explores the intrinsically political function of historical epistemology in the dual discursive contexts of interwar France (Bachelardian epistemology) and the post-1967 Arab debates over cultural "authenticity" between the "tradition" and "modernity". In the latter context, Moroccan philosopher Mohammed 'Abed al-Jabri appeals in part to Gaston Bachelard in a project of cultural renaissance circumscribed by notions of religious tradition. In doing so,

however, Al-Jabri did not simply translate Bachelard's concepts into Arabic, but found in his ostensibly apolitical musings on the natural sciences the articulation of an Arab-Islamic renaissance on its own terms. From al-Jabri's decentered perspective, Bachelard's justification for the methodological independence of scientific communities (*les cités savantes*), which inspired a generation of post-modern thinkers in the West, is transformed into a political project for an Arab-Islamic Enlightenment.

In "*Rethinking the Religion/Secularism Binary in Global Politics*", **Mohammad Abdul Gaffar** argues for the dislodging of the Global South from the Western-centric "imperialism of categories"; its "religious-secular" binary imposed through "objective" notions of history and exclusive formulations of identity. Departing from modern scholarship on the so-called "religious resurgence", Gaffar focuses on the context of South Asia to explore parallel discursive developments in Hindu and Islamic nationalism as articulated by V.D. Savarkar and M.A. Jinnah, respectively. He highlights the secularist foundations of political religion in the hope of making room for the temporal pluralities and transcendence of everyday religion. By means of discourse analysis, Gaffar shows that, contrary to the explicit claims of these thinkers, their secular impulses remain intact beyond their self-proclaimed turn towards religious communalism as the foundation for the modern state.

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