

Editorial

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This special issue of the *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* brings together a stimulating mix of contributions to the study of religion. The first two articles, authored by Brent Nongbri and Kevin Schilbrack, present us with different perspectives on the way in which scholars could and should approach the concept of “religion” analytically. The succeeding two articles comprise broader expositions from two specific fields of religious studies: Islam and China. In this way, the issue offers both composite theoretical reflections on religion as an academic subject and broader empirical expositions into specific subject matters relevant to all interested in the field of religious studies.

In 2022, the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CTR) at Lund University arranged a two-day colloquium in Ystad, to which Nongbri and Schilbrack were invited as keynote speakers. The aim of the colloquium was to bring together the scholars and teachers active at the CTR to discuss the one key element that brings us all together: the concept of religion. The CTR is a dynamic academic environment, encompassing a diversity of scholars exploring a large variety of different thematical subjects in a number of cultural contexts. The methodological range is also broad at the CTR. Nongbri and Schilbrack, both acclaimed scholars who have contributed to theoretically advancing the ever ongoing discussions regarding the concept of religion, were invited to speak on the concept’s potentials and limitations. At the time of the colloquium, the CTR had recently welcomed two

new professors to the department: Esther-Maria Guggenmos and Oliver Scharbrodt. They were therefore also invited to share their views on the subject from their specific fields of expertise: Islamic Studies and Chinese Buddhism. Both Guggenmos and Scharbrodt contribute to this issue with their respective inaugural lectures.

In 2013, Brent Nongbri published the well-received book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, where he problematizes the projection of the concept religion to historical epochs (and in extension cultural contexts) that lacked the term or its equivalent.¹ In a series of articles, Kevin Schilbrack has explored the implications of Nongbri's points about the unfeasibility of imagining religion "before [the concept] religion" existed. Schilbrack has argued, contrary to Nongbri, that we indeed can claim that religion was or is present in cultures and periods that were or are alien to the concept itself – all the while recognizing that "religion" is a European and Christian creation with limitations and problems.² In their articles in this special issue, Nongbri and Schilbrack continue the debate concerning the analytic viability of the concept religion.

The inaugural lectures of Esther-Maria Guggenmos and Oliver Scharbrodt, which are published here in revised form, explore foundational issues for religious studies. Guggenmos's article relates to the topic of how one can study religion in China today; a most relevant question given the fact that the very birth of the modern concept of religion coincided with a reawakened interest in China and the East in the eighteenth century. Scharbrodt explores, among other things, how Islam relates to the modern and Western concept of religion. European curiosity with exploring the nature of Islam, Asian religions, and other "foreign" cultures has given rise to the establishment of firmer contours of what should and should not constitute religion. Today, we are aware of the Christian premises surrounding the concept. The religions of India, China, and the Middle East – not to mention Africa and the Americas – were approached not from their own premises, but always in relation to Christianity, and sometimes to demonstrate the purity or superiority of the latter. Christianity, chiefly Protestantism, has, so to speak, been used as a blueprint for identifying other religions. Thus, the written word and the internalization of doctrinal beliefs have been given priority

1. Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, New Haven, CT 2013, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300154160.001.0001>.

2. See Kevin Schilbrack, "Imagining 'Religion' in Antiquity: A How To", in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity*, Sheffield 2019, 59–78; Kevin Schilbrack, "A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon", *Critical Research on Religion* 8 (2020), 87–100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303219900229>; Kevin Schilbrack, "The Realist Discursive Study of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 36 (2024), 419–439, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10127>.

and emphasis at the expense of certain lived perspectives and oral traditions. The legitimizing and typological power of “origins” is also an important aspect to recognize, which cannot be confined to the discourse of the modern concept of religion. Already the earliest Christians – on both sides of the border of proto-orthodoxy – valued apostolic order. Doctrines that could be tied to people who had actually met the “originators” – Jesus of Nazareth or his closest disciples – were given priority. The result was the creation of specific genres – such as the gospel and *vita* genres – and standardizations in theological argumentation.

The quest for Christian origins did not subside with the development of modern historical methods. The earliest theologians who developed and employed historical critical methods often did so with the specific aim of reaching as close as possible to the words and teachings of Jesus, in the hopes of identifying the purest and least polluted version of Christianity. However, in the words of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), “there is something altogether different behind things; not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms”.³ The value placed in origins and chronological priority, however, is not a Western invention. In the historical China, for example, only those religions that could be traced back in Chinese history were allowed to operate within the empire; the older the better, which meant that the representatives of the most ancient religions had the most influence at the emperors’ courts. Christian missionaries managed, at times, to gain influence at the court by providing proof to the emperor that there had been Christians in China since antiquity, and that Christianity was in fact a Chinese religion on par with, for example, Buddhism.⁴

The American historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) – whose legacy is claimed by both Nongbri and Schilbrack in their respective articles – has contributed in many ways to the study of religion. One of his contributions is deconstructing the impression that religion (or at least the category of religion) is dependent on unique experiences. Without taking a stand on the authenticity, accuracy, or actuality of individual experience, we should be clear that what we as scholars of religion are studying are not *sui generis* characters. To declare that human experience of this kind exists – religious or otherwise – would instantaneously disqualify them from academic study. In fact, it would disqualify them from being the subject of

3. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York 1984, 78.

4. In a PhD project at the CTR, Jiangong Li explores – among other things – these very questions, from the perspective of the reception of the Jingjiao Stele during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

meaningful discussion at all. Following the reasoning of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and subsequent philosophers of language, what makes human communication successful is its establishment in things shared (regardless of positionings made regarding *das Ding an sich*). From this perspective, it is easy to agree with Smith that we, as scholars of religion, are ultimately dependent on acts of comparison.⁵

Schilbrack's article rejects a line of argument forwarded by scholars such as Talal Asad, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Timothy Fitzgerald, that religion is, at best, a concept void of analytical value and without a referent in the world, or, at worst, a Western construct that leads to confusion and undermines real studies in human behaviour.⁶ Fitzgerald, for example, has argued that the concept has been used to describe and classify so many different things that it has become empty of content, forcing the world into either a secular or religious sphere that does not reflect the actual lives of people. Fitzgerald's fieldwork in Japan made him convinced of the errors of the dichotomy between religion and secularity, and that it was not possible to isolate the parts of Japanese people's lives that was to be placed in the category religion and what the lines of the category secular were. These observations, together with the fact that the category was in itself based on a Christian outlook – an idea that had already been introduced by critical and postmodern theoreticians like Talal Asad – led him to the conviction that the concept of religion lacked an actual referent enabling its use. We should thus get rid of the concept altogether. This position is, albeit rare, still echoed. There are several problems with this position, some of which Schilbrack and Nongbri point out in their articles in this special issue. It is a bad idea to turn to abandoning categories that are not clearcut. This tactic does not align itself with the way in which language and human interaction seem to work. Somewhat ironically, scholars who reject the concept because it is damaging (or even causes violence) seem to argue from a perspective which, using Mary Douglas's ideas, divide the world into pure and impure. Pure things (categories in this instance) are things that fit into categories we use to make sense of the world and impure things – dirty and thus dangerous – are those things (categories) that defy our attempt to sort and

5. See, for example, Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago 1990.

6. See, for example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD 1993; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York 1997, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105032.001.0001>; Timothy Fitzgerald, "A Critique of 'Religion' as a Cross-Cultural Category", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997), 91–110.

structure the world around us.⁷ To argue that the category religion should be rejected on the grounds that it does not neatly fit into any other category ends up being a circular argument. In fact, language does not only consist of words of Aristotelian classification.

The texts by Nongbri and Schilbrack are two excellent examples of new and constructive ways forward. Nongbri, not wishing to abandon the concept, still acknowledges its limitations and calls for religious studies – perhaps in particular historical and cross-cultural ones – to begin by recognizing the heuristic and “unnatural” nature of the concept of religion. He does not see, as Schilbrack does, any benefits in religion from a realist perspective and draws on the history of physics to demonstrate that even the most “fundamental ideas about the universe – what we think the ‘real’ character of the world might be – can change quite radically in the space of a few decades”. Schilbrack was given the opportunity to read Nongbri’s text when preparing his own article, resulting in a fruitful rebuttal, clarifying and sharpening his continued support of a critical realist approach. Religion is not, he insists, reducible to or solely dependent on human inquiry. Reducing religion to a heuristic tool devalues the work scholars do in the field of religious studies.

It has been a great learning experience for me, personally, to work with this special issue, which not only gave rise to what I hope will be received as a stimulating read, but also a new PhD course at the CTR surveying the most important theoretical and historical aspects regarding the concept and study of religion. It will be available on a national level beginning in the spring of 2025. ▲

7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966.