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Global Religious History in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

"Global religious history" derives its name from the German phrase "globale Religionsgeschichte". This term articulates an approach that aims to be relevant to the whole field of religious studies, and it encompasses theoretical debates, particularly in the areas of postcolonialism and gender studies. Thus, "Global" embodies, acknowledges, and incorporates all prevalent terms of and the parameters for the global constitution of present-day academia and society. "Religious" means that it concerns religious studies. "History" denotes a genealogical critique as the central research interest. Historicization in that sense is not limited to philological research of sources from the past but also relevant to any research based on data from contemporary anthropological fieldwork or other empirical methods. This approach also aims to provide a pertinent influence on research practice, and seeks to circumvent any artificial segregation of theory and practice.

Keywords

Until recently, religious studies was a shining discipline among the human sciences. It regarded its objects of research as universals that could be found at all times and in all places of human society. It also saw itself as a decidedly critical science. For some decades now, however, religious studies has found this previous self-understanding in deep crisis. It became apparent that the supposedly objective-universal determinations of its subjects were permeated by ideological interests that fundamentally questioned their validity and global applicability, as well as the critical ethos of the discipline (McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000; Nehring 2012). The debates so far have made it clear that religious studies cannot return to an essentialist or metaphysical grounding of its subject matter. As elsewhere in the world, scholars in German-speaking parts of Europe have been looking for positive ways forward. One outcome of these discussions has been the project which is called "globale Religionsgeschichte" in the German language and might be best translated into English as "global religious history", though not as "global history of religions" as the latter reminds too much of Eliade's "Chicago School", the essentialist universalism of which this new approach strictly opposes. If literally translated instead as "global history of religion", it can easily be misunderstood as only about a conceptual history of "religion", although, as will be shown, a general approach to religious studies is proposed.

Global religious history is not a unified, comprehensive theoretical system, but rather a shared consensus that certain critical questions should inform any research design. It aims to preserve the universal and critical tradition of religious studies, insisting on the global reach of its objects, on its global historical perspective, and on its critical epistemological interest. In their introduction to this special issue, Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube give a comprehensive overview on its current state of research and the scholars involved (Maltese & Strube 2021). In themselves the questions raised are not new, and understanding their basic necessity and general concern requires only common sense. However, it turns out that these questions can be decisively sharpened when they take up theoretical debates, particularly from the areas of postcolonialism, cultural studies, or gender and queer studies.

With regard to theory, one further concern of global religious history is to overcome any segregation between theoretical debate and "practical-concrete" research that allegedly does not need theory, which is unfortunately still a widespread notion in religious studies. Theoretical debates should always be directly relevant to and evaluated by empirical research, rather than considered as separate issues. Theoretical debates are a way to raise questions for doing concrete research, whereas the research itself will stick to established philological, anthropological, sociological, and similar methods, although the latter always have to be critical evaluated in the light of these theoretical questions. In that sense, global religious history is more about theory than methodology, even though a dialectical relationship between both is recognized.

In the end, the main focus of global religious history is on concrete research. Accordingly, the following observations concentrate on the practical implementation of theoretical approaches. They aim to show which steps are necessary to develop a research design and how the articles presented in this special issue on global religious history have realized this in each case.

1   The Current State of Research as Starting Point

Like any other research, global religious history first asks how the object it wants to study was previously investigated. However, it is less interested to read previous research as an increase of knowledge; rather, it critically questions the major research narratives that present themselves as established knowledge, allegedly supported by clear empirical evidence. Its focus is on the controversial nature of the state of research. Even if it seems that a particular interpretation has largely prevailed, it is necessary to thoroughly study dissenting research opinions. The latter are an indication of blind spots which established research opinion has ignored. Once a particular scholarly debate has been reconstructed from the state of research, it is important to situate it within the broader cultural context. In today's humanities, it is a given that academic research does not take place in an ivory tower, but is part of larger societal debates which influence every research interest and which are, conversely, shaped by the results of academic research. It should be remembered that religious studies had to learn that lesson the hard way, when it was confronted with the accusation that it supported extremely dubious and irrational politicizing of public knowledge (McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 2001; Dubuisson 2003; Nehring 2012). To take this point as seriously as possible, any research design that subscribes to a global religious history must comprehensively contextualize the current state of research. Practice has shown that the results of postcolonial, cultural, or gender studies are often particularly helpful in questioning supposedly well-founded findings and critically reflecting on the social embedding of research.

The articles of this special issue precisely echo this approach. Yan Suarsana (2021) takes up one of the most established ideas in religious studies, namely that the modern concept of "religion" has mainly Christian origins and is therefore a "Western" one. The ideological implications are obvious and are widely discussed in religious studies. Suarsana aims to challenge that received notion. In a sense, Julian Strube's (2021) article follows on from Suarsana's reflections on the current state of research on religion. Strube observes a tendency to conceptualize the religious discourse in nineteenth-century South Asia as between a "Western" position – where he takes the Theosophical Society and the discussion on "Western esotericism" as a key example – and an "Eastern", i.e. South Asian, position, each principally incommensurable to the other. Moreover, research has often concentrated on the late nineteenth century and on key figures like Vivekananda and Max Müller, but has not paid enough attention to the direct pre-history of these rather late encounters. In short, current research on the history of South Asian religions reifies a categorical differentiation between a "West" and an "East", which is, then, the starting point of many ideological debates in and about contemporary South Asia. Strube wants to challenge this notion.

Giovanni Maltese (2021) struggles with similar problems surrounding conceptualizing the "West". He shows how research on the history of Malaysia favors a narrative that explains the emergence of the new independent state out of a secular nationalist agenda, which considered Islam as the religion of the new state but within a democratic society which granted religious freedom to its multi-ethnic population. Recent Islamist movements are seen as an alien ideological import from the Middle East that does not go along with Malay(sian) cultural tradition and traditional Malay(sian) Islam. Maltese parallels this narrative with the recent position of certain Islamicists, who reject the idea of Islam as a "religion" because the latter would be a "Western" concept, and refer to current debates in religious studies as proof. Maltese argues that this mirrors the idea of Islamists in Malaysia, who also reject the idea of Islam as a "religion" because the concept is "Western" and therefore "unislamic". In short, all agree that Islam as a "religion" is a "Western" concept, because it has its historical origins in the "West", and this notion feeds different ideological interests. Maltese wants to challenge this notion.

Judith Bachmann (2021) identifies a similar constellation when it comes to the juxtaposition of the "West" with "Africa". She comprehensively analyses previous research on the history of today's African witchcraft among the Yoruba. She identifies two dominant positions. One considers it a product of colonial encounter between Africans and Christian missions, and the other a survival of African traditions from pre-colonial times. Both question whether African witchcraft belongs to the sphere of "religion". In all cases, African witchcraft is seen as a culturally specific "African" concept that has no relationship to today's Wicca, the neopagan witchcraft movement in Europe and North America. In contrast to African witchcraft, many scholars agree that Wicca is a "religion" and a mere product of late modernity with an invented older history. Whereas African witchcraft is seen as an example of dangerous, pre-modern, regional African traditions which are criminalized in many countries, witchcraft in Europe and North America is viewed in an opposite light. This current state of research has direct consequences for societal debates in Africa. When the Witches and Wizards Association of Nigeria has demanded public acceptance of witchcraft as religion, Pentecostals and secularists alike have warned of the dangers of African witchcraft, seemingly backed by the current state of research.

Jörg Haustein (2021) explains how particular notions of Islam in German East Africa are produced and reified through historical analyses that draw

mainly on colonial archives, given the relative paucity of Muslim writings from this region and time. He points out that while many historical scholars critically engage with colonial perceptions of Islam as Eurocentric and ill-fitting, their readings of these colonial sources nonetheless continue to operate with a "religionized" understanding of Islam as a separate social or political force. Haustein argues that this historiographical tendency to isolate and reify Islam as (anti-)colonial actor also informs present identity debates about Islam in Tanzania, which in the end rely on the brittle and politically contingent historical determinations of Muslim political actors in German colonial sources.

Finally, Dimitry Okropiridze (2021) looks at today's discourse on science and religion in three very different settings: Jürgen Habermas, the Intellectual Dark Web, and Alexander Dugin. There is no current state of research since nobody has ever compared these three. However, he takes them as examples of how a contemporary global discourse on science and religion takes both as ontologically self-evident entities. He observes that disparate articulations follow a joint vocabulary which stems from a rationalist and scientific discourse based on a widely established notion of religion and science as fundamentally and universally juxtaposed entities.

2　Recognizing a Present-Day Global Perspective

The second step in developing a research design is to look more closely at the meaning of the key terms involved. This requires certain preliminary theoretical considerations in order to establish the "global" perspective as constitutive for religious studies. The following argument is based on poststructuralist epistemology and postcolonial criticism that I have substantiated in more detail elsewhere but cannot elaborate further here (Bergunder 2014; Bergunder 2016; Bergunder 2018; Bergunder 2020). Most of the special issue's articles also cover more or less similar theoretical questions. Yan Suarsana explores the potential of Michel Foucault's understanding of historiography for historical research. Dimitry Okropiridze attempts to make Foucault's concept of the "dispositif" fruitful for the determination of global general terms in today's world. Giovanni Maltese uses Ernesto Laclau's "empty signifier" to elaborate on the ontological status of an excluded other as pure negativity in a materialized signifier. Jörg Haustein's article contains a fascinating, original theoretical contribution on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical figure of the rhizome. He shows how this can be used to interpret colonial sources in such a way that a comprehensive historiography is possible without neglecting their complex multifaceted plurality and tangled interconnectedness. Judith Bachmann refers to Lydia Liu's theory of translingual practice and suggests that it could help to much better conceptualize global discursive entanglements across different languages. In this, she continues an argument introduced by Adrian Hermann into the discussions about a global religious history (Hermann 2015). All these contributions indicate that a lively theoretical debate is still going on. It constantly changes and deepens the global religious history approach.

2.1　Inescapability of the Present and of the Global in All General Terms
From an epistemological point of view, "concepts" are highly problematic, as they have an essentialist foundation which is not very helpful for a religious studies perspective that wants to overcome precisely this (Bergunder 2014). A useful alternative is to speak of "naming" instead, as suggested by Ernesto Laclau (2005). According to Laclau, naming is a pure, present articulation that refers to nothing behind or in front of itself. It is a newly created act, which does not express the proper usage of a linguistic term. For that reason, however, it is often denoted by the rhetorical figure of a catachresis (lat. abusio), thereby denying the possibility of "proper" usage of a linguistic term. With reference to Derrida's critique of the "transcendental signified", the possibility of a "proper" signification is denied at the same time.

Meaning exists, at first, only as a pure presence in the articulation of a name, and the only possibility of its duration is through a repetition of the same naming. The crucial epistemological point is that repetition is on the one hand necessary, since otherwise no meanings can be fixed – or in the language used here: no general terms can be formed – but at the same time repetition is contingent (Butler 1995). The name as a purely present articulation has a diachronic or permanent perspective only insofar as it is at the same time "citation", that is, repetition. Only repetition fixes meaning. The latter, however, endures only as long as and by virtue of the fact that it is repeated in the present.

It follows from what has been said so far that the fixation of meaning is, epistemologically speaking, a purely present and contingent matter that is exclusively an expression of present debates. That is, any general term used in religious studies must prove its legitimacy and appropriateness within contemporary debates, both within academia and in broader society. The crucial point of this insight is that all terms in religious studies have to reflect a global applicability, because both academic and social discourse today are thoroughly global. It is at this point that the "global" in a global religious history emerges and becomes relevant.

2.2 *Regional Contemporary Hegemony versus Regional Historical Origins*

Before we elaborate on this, we have to consider supposedly regionally limited phenomena, because they play a crucial role in religious studies. If, for example, a certain phenomenon is to be characterized as "European" or "German" etc, then this could mean that in the present the corresponding phenomenon does not occur outside Europe, Germany, etc. However, such a statement also pre-supposes a global perspective. If no purely regional occurrence can be stated, then every regional marker is only a claim to best fill out a general term that will always be contested. "German beer" is not a beer that exists only in Germany, but the commercially motivated claim of certain breweries from Germany to produce the best beer in the world, for the world. This claim that real beer is German beer is globally received but also fiercely contested by other breweries all around the world. Regional claims on subject matters are common in religious studies and many other disciplines, but the argument is often different.

Let us take "religion" as an example. All over the world today, outside Europe and in all non-European languages, an established use of "religion" is to be found (Peterson & Walhof 2002). So, it should be self-evident that "religion" is as global as beer. At the same time, it is quite common among scholars of religious studies to speak about a "European/Western concept of religion". Similar to the "German" in "German beer", the "European/Western" in the "European/ Western concept of religion" is a scholarly claim that one regional form of religion is best, or more precisely spoken, is prototypical to all other forms of "religion". These other forms are thus declared to be less authentic forms of "religion", because all their differences from the European/Western prototype automatically become a deficiency. That this is an overtly Eurocentric perspective seems obvious (Bergunder 2016).

However, most scholars who represent such a position would expressly reject any Eurocentrism and refer to supposedly certain historical facts. They instead argue that "religion" has its historical "origin" in the "West/Europe", and that this would make "religion" a "European/Western" concept. Hence, a "European/Western concept of religion" would be a historical fact and not a present and contested claim of what is the best prototype for the globally used term "religion". A claim for regional hegemonics in the present is transferred into the alleged historical fact of a regional origin from the past. Scholars who hold this position would claim that they only relate to historical facts that cannot be a hegemonic claim by definition, and obviously that is a widely accepted argument in academia and beyond. Why does this reference to an essentialized origin enjoy such wide plausibility? In the following I will argue that, firstly, academic historiography still thinks in terms of "origins" despite the now venerable critique by Michel Foucault, and secondly, the pure presence of any articulation of meaning is concealed by "sedimentation" or "materialization" in any discourse, be it academic or quotidian.

2.3 *Genealogy versus Historical Origins*

Michel Foucault fundamentally criticized historical thinking fixated on origins (Bergunder 2014: 269–270). With reference to Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) he proposed a new understanding of history (Foucault 1977). He sharply and polemically criticized the alleged contemporary praxis of historiography: this "pursuit of the origin" as "the site of truth", that means "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities, because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (Foucault 1977: 142–143). The genealogist wishes rather to dispel "the chimeras of the origin" and detach it from its underlying metaphysics (Foucault 1977: 144). The genealogist finds that things have "no essence":

> What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.
>
> FOUCAULT 1977:142

Foucault censures the search for origin because it promises a unity and continuity of history that historical events themselves, in their disparity, cannot fulfil.

Historiography should also refrain from searching for an aim or telos, nor presume a development according to historical laws. Genealogy concentrates itself on "the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality" (Foucault 1977: 139). It starts from the contingency of all historical events: "The forces operating in history ... respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events" (Foucault 1977: 154–155). Haphazard does not mean arbitrary, however, because the "haphazard conflicts" are not "a struggle amongst equals", but rather a struggle of "domination" (Foucault 1977: 150).

In short, it follows from the rejection of an origin and the repudiation of any teleology or laws in history that any historiography is shaped by its contemporary context. Foucault harshly reproaches the ruling historical scholarship, arguing that it denies this constitutive perspectivity:

Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy – the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.

FOUCAULT 1977: 156

In contrast, Foucault demands that a genealogy always take, as its starting point, the here and now of the historian as the genealogy of one's own knowledge. A direct leap into the past is not possible, rather it concerns "a genealogy of history as the vertical projection of its position" (Foucault 1977: 157). In that, the genealogical project of Foucault strongly supports the idea that naming is a pure articulation in the present.

2.4 *Sedimentation or Materialization of Meaning*

Foucault unmistakably situates historiography in the present. In itself, this statement could hardly be denied as it is commonly acknowledged that historiography is the interpretation of sources from the past in the present. How then is it possible for historiography to produce historical "facts" like the "origin" of general terms as their defining characteristic? Here it is helpful to seek advice again from Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler, who explain how meanings get "sedimented" and "materialized" within a discourse. The main argument is that repetition may become sedimented by endowing the name with supposedly naturally given meanings that disguise the dependence of these meanings on their permanent repetitiveness (Laclau 1990; Butler 2011). Sedimented or materialized signifiers become "facts" allegedly external to any discourse.

The act of repetition, which is strictly speaking always a new creation (it can never be identical with itself), is that which, according to Butler, is constantly sedimented. In this "sedimented iterability" citationality is concealed in the discourse and, through this, at the same time, an objectivization is achieved. Concealment and objectivization create apparently unalterable material references within a discourse. These materialized signifiers – or better: materialized names – claim for themselves a direct reference to a real external outside of the discourse. Butler argues:

> Certain reiterative chains of discursive production are barely legible as reiterations, for the effects they have materialized are those without which no bearing in discourse can be taken. The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility.

BUTLER 2011: 139

General terms that present themselves as sedimented or materialized names structure the social in such a way that their contested character becomes obscure, and both their underlying hegemonic closure and their excluding character, i.e. their contingency, are disguised. In Laclau's words "the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade". These materialized names "tend to assume the form of a mere objective presence" in "the moment of sedimentation" (Laclau 1990: 34). Both Butler and Laclau strongly stress that sedimentation or materialization still depends on repetition. Here, too, the causal repetition depicts a new creation or catachresis. Epistemologically, the repetition cannot possibly be identical with itself, so that any repetition is a re-signification that potentially makes space for transformation (Butler 2011: 184). In other words, any sedimentation also depends on its constant repetition, which enables changes of its meaning even if the materialized signifier seems so unmovingly natural or, better, factual. However, changes can only happen as a re-signification, i.e. within the discourse the meaning of materialized signifiers can never shift fundamentally or simply be rejected altogether at once without finding themselves outside of the discourse. These principal insights have to be kept in mind when speaking about the scholarly discourse of religious studies. It leads us to the main research interest of global religious history, which is the critique of materialized general terms by re-signification.

2.5 *Religious Studies as Genealogical Critique*

Global religious history is committed to a tradition of religious studies that considers itself a critical one. The crucial question here is what kind of critique is meant. What has been said so far suggests that epistemologically it should be a critique of materialized signifiers. Again, we can look to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to clarify the philosophical normativity of such a critique. In the final phase of his work, Foucault understood genealogy in a more general way than in his earlier reception of Nietzsche, which we discussed above (Bergunder 2014: 273–275). Genealogy is now a "permanent critique of our historical era" (Foucault 2007b: 109). That means that it entails "a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing, through a historical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 2007b: 113). Historical ontology is "critical ontology" (Foucault 2007b: 118), thus its general interest exists in "critique" itself:

> Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.

FOUCAULT 2007a: 47

In his notion of critique, Foucault sees himself in the tradition of Immanuel Kant and his understanding of the Enlightenment (Hemminger 2004). "What Kant was describing as the Aufklärung [Enlightenment] is very much what I was trying ... to describe as critique" (Foucault 2007a:: 48). Critique, for Foucault, is an Enlightenment "ethos" which questions the power structures of present society. Genealogy criticizes fossilized and concealed power practices which have become sedimented or materialized signifiers. It reveals their historical development and, with it, their contingency (Foucault 2007b: 114). Contingency does not mean either "chance" or "arbitrariness"; rather the insight that what is is not of necessity so. With this, the power and might of sedimented names are not contested; as materialized references these claim a necessary existence. However, the demonstration of their contingency leads to "a field of possibles, of openings, indecisions, reversals and possible dislocations" (Foucault 2007a: 66). Critique, in Foucault's understanding, has nothing to do with the advocacy of postmodern arbitrariness, nor does it stand for relativism. As we already pointed out, the insight into contingency merely opens up space for transformations. It could be said, with Judith Butler, that in critique "one looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also for the limits of those conditions, the moment where they point up their contingency and their transformability" (Butler 2002: 222).

One should be clear about the ethical and normative foundation of genealogical critique. Materialized names present themselves as established truth that cannot be disputed within a discourse. To reveal their contingency through genealogical critique is to reveal that they cannot hold their promise to be mere facts, because then it becomes obvious that they represent a contested position and not undisputed facts. Because they falsely claim to be uncontested truth, they could be called ideology in the broad sense of the word. Genealogical critique is critique of such ideologies, no matter which side it is propagated from. With regard to religious studies, it should be noted that genealogical critique has nothing to do with the conventional "anti-religion" critique. The latter criticizes religion as irrationality, superstition, etc, in favor of rationality, science, and so on. Foucault's critique is directed in equal measure towards all forms of metaphysical certainty that bring forth materialized signifiers, including the certainty of the anti-religion critique (Mas 2012). More generally, it should be pointed out once again that genealogical criticism can only take place in the gesture of positive historiography and does not stop at a negative finding.

2.6   History and Historicization

So far, we have seen that naming is a hegemonic but, at the same time, contingent act in the present, which is necessary to create meaning. Established general terms in the current state of research may be framed as materialized names whose contingency is concealed. Genealogical critique is the operation that tries to reveal this contingency through re-signification. To enable critique as re-signification, i.e. to possibly shift the meaning of a supposedly established and unchangeable fact, it is necessary to show that any general term has a history. Genealogical critique could be understood as radical historicization. In this context, history has a specific meaning, which is somewhat different from its usage in the academic discipline that bears this name. The history of a general term is the repetition on which it depends. Historicization, i.e. showing that the materialized name has a history, means to reveal its concealed dependence on its repetition. In this understanding we follow Judith Butler who wrote:

> The historicity of discourse implies the way in which history is constitutive of discourse itself. It is not simply that discourses are located *in* histories, but that they have their own constitutive historical character. Historicity is a term which directly implies the constitutive character of history in discursive practice, that is, a condition in which a "practice" could not exist apart from the sedimentation of conventions by which it is produced and becomes legible.
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> BUTLER 2011: 214 n. 7

The history of a discourse "not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages". (Butler 2011: 172). A materialized general term "accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices" (Butler 2011: 172), but, at the same time, conceals this practice. The general terms draw their power from this double strategy:

> What this means, then, is, that a performative "works" to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.
>
> BUTLER 2011: 172

Historicization applies to any general term and concerns the whole of religious studies. It is not limited to philological research on sources from the past. It is

also relevant to any research based on data from anthropological fieldwork or other empirical methods, which can hardly be suspended from a historicization of the general terms used. This is illustrated by Judith Bachmann's article in this special issue, which emerged from research based on anthropological fieldwork in Nigeria, and by Dimitry Okropiridze's contribution, which covers an ongoing discourse on religion and science.

2.7 *Global Religious History*

In short, "global religious history" is an approach that wants to be relevant to the whole of religious studies. "Global" means that all its general terms have to recognize the global constitution of present-day academia and society. "Religious" means that it concerns religious studies. "History" means that it proposes genealogical critique through historicization as its central research interest.

3 Methodological Implications

These theoretical considerations have to be pragmatically adapted to the rules of the academic disciplines wherein research takes place. I will concentrate on three central aspects of this adaptation and show how the articles of this special issue try to implement them.

3.1 *Historical Continuity and the Determination of a Global Point of Comparison*

As a previous naming is never identical with the repeated current one, there is always first and foremost discontinuity in history. Any citation has its own unique context whereby discontinuity automatically comes to light. On the other hand, I have emphasized that the changes which happen between repetitions of materialized general terms are so minimal that the difference might seem to be of no practical relevance for concrete research. In practical scholarship, scholars have to determine the salient characteristics that keep a general term identical with itself in their assessment. This scholarly determination defines how long a chain of repetition may be considered to transmit a continuity of the same meaning back in to the past.

It is the determination of the subject matter that decides whether the chain of repetition back into the past is considered as historical continuity or discontinuity. History emerges as a function of the present. Establishing continuity or discontinuity is in each and every case a comparison between present-day

subject matter and evidence from historical sources. In religious studies there is usually acute awareness of how sensitive any research in comparative religion has become, whereas historical research is allegedly considered less problematic (Freiberger 2019; Bergunder 2016; Meyer 2017). In the light of the global religious history approach this difference can hardly be upheld. This means, on the one hand, that there is no need – or better: no feasible way – for religious studies to bury its comparative tradition. On the other hand, religious studies needs to have a more critical focus on its historical research. Any comparison is determined by its point of comparison, which is identical with the defining characteristics of a general term. The point of comparison precedes the comparison and at the same time is confirmed by every comparative operation. Differences and similarities cannot criticize the point of comparison itself. Postcolonial debates have shown that points of comparison are often determined by regional prototypes, mostly European ones (Bergunder 2016). If that is the case, then any global application will necessarily privilege the regional point of comparison. Here, it is not necessary to go into all the theoretical details. It is enough to emphasize that the point of comparison must not fall behind the reach of its planned application. If it is a regional one – if, as is very doubtful, that makes any practical sense – it can only be applied to a regional context. A European point of comparison must not be applied to anything outside Europe, and so on. If you define "beer" according to the German Purity Law (*Deutsches Reinheitsgebot*), then any other beer that is different because it does not fall under that law is not only simply different, but different in the sense of deficient. The reason is that the point of comparison is not affected by the comparison itself.

That raises the crucial question: What general terms should research in religious studies use as the starting point for its genealogical critique? There are both easy and difficult answers. The easy answer is that religious studies receives the general terms from the current state of research. There are no other terms available. Scholarly research without reference to the general terms of the respective discipline is not possible. However, when these general terms are understood as materialized signifiers their claim to be established truth is not received as a given. Instead these general terms are understood as hegemonic claims in a present-day global discourse. As such they have to be contextualized within this discourse. Usually the plausibility of scholarly terms will depend on contemporary, everyday understandings outside the academy that reinforce and inform them. Religious studies does not have the autonomy to define its subject matters because it is interwoven with the broader social

discourse. So, the contextualization of a general term concerns both academia and global society. Elsewhere, I have tried to show how such a contextualization of general terms could take place in practice, using "religion" itself as the subject matter of religious studies (Bergunder 2014).

In short, from these considerations, combined with what has already been said, it follows that the global religious history approach takes general terms from the current state of research as the starting point of its own research design. However, these general terms are now consistently understood as present-day articulations that must be contextualized within academia and society, both understood as constitutively global. As such these general terms form the point of comparison for the historicization.

All the articles of this special issue try to establish a present-day global point of comparison as the starting-point of their research. Dimitry Okropiridze expressly tackles the question of how today's global understanding of religion can be conceptualized. From his very diverse sources he reconstructs a common notion of religion and science, one which all participants in this discourse take as a matter-of-fact assumption, or, as I have termed it, a materialized signifier. Okropiridze reconstructs today's global point of comparison behind our common notion of religion and science. He also shows that this point of comparison itself is not critically questioned, in any of the vastly different conceptions with which he deals. Julian Strube starts with contemporary understandings of esotericism, Hinduism, and Christianity in their global entanglements and aims to explore their pre-history. In the same vein, Yan Suarsana opens with the notion that today's discourse on religion is genuinely global and includes Christianity. He takes today's global Christianity as the starting point of his investigation. Similarly, Giovanni Maltese sees contemporary Islam as a global discourse, and views the discussion over whether or not Islam is a "religion" as a contemporary global hegemonic struggle among scholars of various disciplines, including Islamicists. Drawing on her own fieldwork, Judith Bachmann shows that a closer look at the contemporary discussion over witchcraft in Nigeria reveals how it is embedded in a global debate that stretches from Africa to Europe and the United States. In contrast to previous research, she takes a global understanding of today's witchcraft as a starting point, rather than an allegedly purely regional African one.

Finally, Jörg Haustein problematizes the way in which today's notion of Islam was introduced into the scholarly reading of colonial sources. In contrast to the other articles, he is more interested in tracing ruptures and discontinuities in the colonial archive, in order to map out the ideological forces and

processes that lie beneath colonial appropriations of Islam as an epistemic category and political actor, and which, in a subtle way, still appear to inform the contemporary discourse about Muslim agency in East Africa.

3.2 Reversal of the Timeline

How can historicization be transferred into scholarly practice? The main idea is to trace the chain of repetition, on which a general term is based, back into the past. The entry point for any research can only be the contemporary global usage of general terms, never any supposed "origin" or "forerunners" in the past. Genealogical critique reverses, then, the process of the chronological timeline and goes from the present into the past! Genealogical critique asks about the immediate pre-history of the present and then about the immediate pre-history of this pre-history. The aim is to explore historically how far today's discourse can be continuously traced back into the past. Tracing the repetition of contemporary general terms back into the past can easily be transferred into historical methodology. It is an established practice of historical research to determine the immediate antecedents for any given source.

However, there is more to consider which is at least as important. First and foremost, a globally used general term needs a global pre-history which widens the scope of sources and languages that are of potential relevance. Second, previous research has shown that global pre-history is interwoven in such complex ways that concrete philological dependencies often cannot be determined, although it is clear that all participants argued within the same discourse. Since these aspects pose many practical difficulties scholars have to be both pragmatic in their concrete research and always looking for methodological improvement in the future.

These concerns are clearly reflected in all the articles of the special issue. Starting from today's notion of Christianity as religion Yan Suarsana queries its genealogical pre-history. His main argument is that continuity cannot be traced past the second half of the nineteenth century, before which no notion of Christianity as religion in the modern sense can be observed. Accordingly, Suarsana tries to establish how Christianity was newly born as a religion during that time within a global colonial setting. Julian Strube is also committed to a strict genealogical pre-history, with a similar special focus on the nineteenth century. He challenges the notion of clear-cut boundaries between "Western" and "Eastern" positions by looking at texts written by Indians who engaged with both. It becomes clear that for them "West" and "East" were strategic boundaries of the same discourse. His main focus is to show that during the whole of the nineteenth century Indian intellectuals were part of a global discourse that

involved the members of the Brahmo Samaj, Unitarians, Transcendentalists, Christian missionaries, Theosophists, Orientalists and many more. All influenced each other during that time, although the colonial situation has to be kept in mind.

Giovanni Maltese analyses the pre-history of today's global discourse on Islam in a strictly genealogical way. He concentrates on Malaysia and asks how long the current debates on Islam versus "religion" can be traced back with historical continuity. In Malaysia, the debate did not start with recent Islamists but was already in full flow in the first half of the twentieth century. Previous scholarship has ignored the period that Maltese now brings to light. Moreover, he clearly shows that the discourse was a truly global one already in this earlier period. Jörg Haustein's general focus is the pre-history of today's political Islam. German orientalism's influence on the discourse on Islam and politics in the Ottoman Empire has been widely discussed. What has been overlooked is the immediate pre-history, which is found in the colonial discussion about the existence of a political Islam in German East Africa, which Haustein addresses.

After establishing a global understanding of African witchcraft, Judith Bachmann also looks at its pre-history. She shows that the presumed opposites of African and European witchcraft are both products of the same global historical entanglement. The "African" in African witchcraft is the result of actual positionings against "European"/"Western" concepts within one and the same global discourse. This reverses the previous understanding of the history of African witchcraft. The pre-history of African witchcraft is a global one.

Dimitry Okropiridze does not do any explicit historicization due to his focus on a reconstruction of a contemporary discourse of religion and science. He does, however, point out how all the texts which he is presenting rely on historical arguments to back up their ideas on religion and science, and to justify the point of comparison on which they all rely.

3.3   Genealogical Critique as Counter-History

Foucault repeatedly stresses that genealogy does not in any way mean a break with the established methods of historical scholarship; on the contrary, it "demands relentless erudition" (Foucault 1977: 140; Brieler 1998: 600). Moreover, genealogical critique is not able to overcome the use of general terms because names are necessary to fix meaning. To show that certain materialized names are contingent can only be done meaningfully within the discourse itself. It needs a hegemonic articulation of its own. This means that, immediately after it was done, this articulation fell under genealogical critique. Genealogical critique can only take the form of a positive historiography

that develops convincing historical narratives and offers concrete alternative interpretations of sources to the current state of research. The genealogical task is thus to write a positive counter-history, or alternative history, which is nevertheless committed to established scholarly conventions. Counter-history does not mean that everything that has been done so far is to be criticized. It is only "counter" to the specific contemporary sedimentation in the current state of research, which disguises its contingency and which the counter-history wants to address. A counter-history can, should, and must also refer positively to completed research that supports its argumentation. In following disciplinary conventions, counter-history is written as conventional positive history. Although the genealogical approach goes from the present back into the past, counter-history allows the pragmatic compromise of "scriptural inversion" (de Certeau 1988), i.e., writing history along the chronological timeline.

Although global religious history does understand history from a strictly present perspective, it does not exclude any historical phenomena that traditionally belong to the scope of religious studies. Present-day "religions" must be researched in terms of the total history in which they present themselves today. Only then can genealogical praxis reveal its critical potential. In that way, a study of ancient sources like the Upanishads or the Pali Canon remains an indispensable part of the genealogical critique. However, the starting point is always a present-day global understanding. Within the approach proposed here there is no direct journey into the past, and it should be noted in no uncertain terms that this means, from an epistemological point of view, that the twentieth century is in no way nearer to the present than the second century.

Accordingly, all the articles of the special issue should be read in two ways: first as scholarly investigations in their own right and second as counter-histories. Dimitry Okropiridze gives a close reading of the notion of religion and science in relation to Jürgen Habermas, the Dark Web and Alexander Dugin. He relates the specifics of each text and also compares the differences. This is undoubtedly a scholarly interpretation in its own right. At the same time, he refers to previous research, including that in the articles of this special issue, which argues that the historical arguments brought forward by the respective authors can be successfully confronted by a counter-history. In this process the materialized signifiers, or the matter-of-fact assumptions, reveal themselves as contingent.

The main part of Yan Suarsana's article consists of a philological analysis of the theology of four main representatives of liberal theology in Germany from the end of the nineteenth century. Again, this is a careful scholarly investigation that can be appreciated without any reference to a global religious history approach. It is also a counter-history because it fundamentally challenges

the received view that Christianity has been understood as a "religion" since times immemorial. Suarsana shows that Christianity became a "religion" within a global discourse and not within an allegedly separate regional "European" or "Western" history.

Julian Strube offers an in-depth study of Rajnarayan Basu, a prominent leader of the Brahmo Samaj in the 1860s and 1870s. From Basu's writings in English and Bengali Strube reconstructs his understanding of religion and how it is embedded in a truly global discourse. Strube's analysis of Rajnarayan Basu stands in its own right as a thorough scholarly investigation. However, his illustration of how Theosophy and Brahmo Samaj were arguing in very much the same way, though each claimed superiority for their own teachings, should also be read as a counter-history.

The main part of Maltese's article is a thorough philological study of the central works by Fazl-ur Rahman Ansari from the 1930s and 1940s. Ansari was an English-educated Muslim intellectual from British Malaya who argued for a conceptual place for Islam within a global discourse on religion. Maltese shows that he not only engaged with the Islamic tradition but also with European philosophers and Christian theologians. Moreover, he was also deeply influenced by Muhammad Iqbal, who was himself a typical representative of a globally entangled discourse in British India. This careful study of Ansari, who has been neglected by previous scholarship, is a scholarly piece in its own right. At the same time, however, it is a counter-history that contributes to an alternative global history of contemporary Islam and its historical relationship to the notion of "religion". Jörg Haustein diligently analyses all available sources of the so-called "Mecca letter affair" in German East Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. He carefully tries to discover relationships between the different layers of texts and to comprehensively survey the complex web of interconnected narratives that cover the "Mecca letter affair". Any scholar who is interested in the subject will appreciate the deep scholarship and the dense description of the topic. However, the article is also a counter-history as his interpretation rejects any notion of "political Islam" in the colonial sources from German East Africa.

The main part of Judith Bachmann's article is an in-depth study of the Alatinga movement in Nigeria in the 1950s and the academic debates it inspired in Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s. It is an original interpretation of the available sources which follows established philological standards. Any scholar should be able to appreciate her sound research. It is written as a counter-history at the same time, however, because Bachmann argues that today's understanding of witchcraft in Nigeria can only be followed continuously back to the Alatinga movement. It was here, in the 1950s, where today's concept of African witchcraft emerged in a global setting, and not in earlier colonial, or even pre-colonial, segregated regional "African" history.

4 Conclusion

The main objection to the global religious history approach is often that none of it is new and that its critical enquiries are now commonplace in religious studies. On the one hand, I can unreservedly agree with this. On the other hand, concrete research in religious studies more often than not relegates these critical enquiries to prefaces or introductions, with less discernible consequences for the actual conduct of the study itself. A global religious history not only aims to overcome any segregation of theory and practice, but also to indicate new paths and topics for further research. The approach has the potential to better connect global, regional, and local research questions. It can also help to overcome the artificial separation between empirical and historical research, and at the same time reflect more accurately on the involvement of religious studies in contemporary social and religious debates.

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