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Do We Really Need Postcolonial Theory, Discourse Theory, and Aesthetics of Religion? Exemplifying their Effects on Historical Research by Example of Aztec Deity Conceptions

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The starting point for the article is a recurrent debate within the (German-speaking) community of scholars of religion about the identity of the discipline and potentially integrating factors in a field with increasingly divergent approaches. Recently, some authors have criticized the seemingly exclusive focus on metatheory, the deconstruction of central concepts such as *religion* and research on their discursive genealogies. They regret that historical studies about non-European religious traditions have been removed from the center of the discipline's work, although these studies provide the indispensable background for any theory building on religion. This article shares the intention to reconsolidate historical studies of religion. However, its leading question is not why and in which ways historical studies are relevant for (meta)theoretical discussions. Reversely, the article asks whether and how (meta)theoretical discussions—the approaches of postcolonial theory, discourse theory, and aesthetics of religion, in particular—might affect specific and concrete historiographical research.

The methodological discussion about the relevance of recent (meta)theoretical approaches for historical studies is exemplified by applying it to research about Aztec deity conceptions. The point of departure is one of the most popular and prevalent interpretations of Aztec “Thought and Culture”, as formulated by Miguel León-Portilla, the most influential contemporary historian working on the Aztecs. León-Portilla devoted his life's work to reconstruct the ideas of an Aztec school of philosophers based in Texcoco with king Nezahualcoyotl as one of its most glorious representatives. According to León-Portilla, these philosophers expressed their deepest concerns about the evanescence of earthly life in poetical songs, which have survived to this day in their precolonial essence, undisturbed by colonial transformations in sources such as the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Yearning for consolation, the poet-philosophers had intuited the existence of the one and only, transcendent deity principle underlying all nature phenomena and their

symbolizations in the Aztec pantheon. León-Portillas interpretation has served as a highly popular means to emphasize the positive aspects of the Aztec civilization in contrast to the bloody human sacrifice conducted by the state ideology of the priests. It has also served as an argument that Aztec civilization was as evolved as the European one by comparing Aztec with Greek philosophy. Following this argumentative strategy, scholars such as León-Portilla translated and arranged Aztec poetry according to known patterns of Greek philosophical poetry.

In this article, I show how postcolonial and discursive perspectives force us to deconstruct this influential thesis as an *invention of tradition* by early colonial indigenous authors. Rooted in early colonial rather than precolonial discourses, it was strongly shaped by the intention of indigenous authors to present a favorable view on the precolonial history and culture of Texcoco. Later, it served perfectly to build a positive and confident national Mexican identity in the country's fight for postcolonial independence. The article continues by selecting one of the arguments León-Portilla used to prove that the Aztec philosophers believed in a transcendent divine principle, namely the deity title *Yohualli Ehecatl* (engl. "Night Wind"). This title was used in several contexts for deities such as Tezcatlipoca, characterized as "invisible" and "untouchable" like the night and the wind. León-Portilla was convinced that this was a reference to an ontological sphere beyond the realm of sensory perception. The recently advocated metatheoretical perspective of the aesthetics of religion raises our awareness for the cultural diversity in relating natural phenomena and sense perceptions with body metaphors, cultural interpretations and religious symbols. Using this awareness, I show that León-Portillas interpretation of *Yohualli Ehecatl* is not supported by the evidence. Instead, many clues in the sources emphasize the earthly character of the deities associated with the title *Yohualli Ehecatl*. *Night* and *Wind* were generally perceived as highly tangible phenomena with direct effects on human bodies. Thus, the example of Aztec deity conceptions and their interpretations shows how applying recent (meta)theoretical discussions have the power to change the specific results of historical research.

"The Power of Christ Compels You!" A Religious Studies Analysis of Power and Power Structures in Catholic Exorcism

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"The power of Christ compels you!" is probably one of the most famous sayings in the Hollywood film "The Exorcist" (1973). During the Catholic exorcism ritual de-

picted in the film, a priest uses divine power (“the power of Christ”) to defeat the demon “Pazuzu”, who has taken possession of a girl. In this scene, power and power relations become visible. According to the thesis of this article, these are reflected in and form the basis of current Catholic exorcism practice. Starting from the question of which power dynamics can be identified in this field, the constructions and transformations of power and power relations that occur on different levels in the narrower and broader context of Catholic exorcism practice will be examined. This will show that there is a reinforcement of the position of power through the generation of the “symbolic power” of exorcists within a diverse marketplace of religious healing.

The protagonists of Catholic exorcism—the exorcist (Catholic priest), the “possessed” (women or men) and the occupying force (devils, demons)—are examined based on the analysis of primary sources, such as canonical and liturgical documents (e.g. *Rituale Romanum*, *Codex Juris Canonici*), and also the current publications and websites of Catholic exorcists. The current implementation of Catholic exorcism refers to a ritual text from the early 17th century, which was revised in the 1990s. The *Rituale Romanum* (1614) represents the basis of the ecclesial exorcism practice across the world and is anchored in canon law. The current practice of exorcism constructs positions of power that are repeated and cemented in religious healing practices and that reflect the fundamental power structures of the Roman Catholic Church.

In this article, power is primarily seen as attributed to human and non-human figures, objects and practices, and it is generated in discourses in specific historical, social or religious contexts and constellations and is expressed in interactions and communication. In religious practices, according to the thesis advocated here, emic power discourses are staged performatively and attributions to positions of power are consolidated. Healing practices in religious contexts are therefore mostly embedded in role models (the role of the healer and the role of the person to be healed) that are based on attributions of power. The positions of power constructed in narratives constitute the healing practice and thus possibly also have an impact on the effect of the practice or the attribution of effects.

During the exorcism ritual, the article argues, the exorcist’s position of power is strengthened. By submitting to supposedly demonic powers and as the executor of the “power of Christ”, he influences the self-perception of the “possessed” person. The exorcism itself represents a performative framework within which supposedly demonic powers are controlled. The Christian narrative of Christ’s victory over the devil finds its symbolic confirmation in the successful exorcism. Power construction thus legitimizes religious healing practices. At the same time, positions of power and the associated hierarchies and dynamics are constructed in healing narratives and consolidated in religious practices. The construction of

diametrical positions of power between the exorcist (who heals) and the possessed (who are healed) fulfill multiple functions. The construction of the exorcist's special position constitutes his "symbolic power", which is internalized by the believers so that they undergo the healing practice. While the omnipotence of the Christian God finds visible expression in exorcism through the performative staging of overcoming evil, power and positions of powerlessness are reinforced and the importance of the Catholic exorcists in the collective healing process, which is expressed in the Christian *topos* of redemption, is legitimized. With the saying "The power of Christ compels you!", a narrative is constructed that goes far beyond the aspect of individual healing, as it (also) takes place in exorcism. In the belief in redemption through the power of Christ and victory over evil, the power position of the Church is demonstrated and thus experiences a significant reinforcement in contemporary society.

The Birth of Religion? Genealogy in the Study of Religion

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Genealogy is a form of critique and has its place in the present. It opposes current concepts, values, institutions, and practices by contrasting them with a radical analysis of their historical development. Genealogy, following Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, comprises three essential aspects: It starts from certain subject-theoretical premises and links these to power-theoretical arguments as well as a certain rhetorical form of presentation. In this way, it seeks to question and transform current ways of self-conception. From this follows for the study of religions that the genealogy has to examine its central objects, first and foremost 'religion', and the position from which it speaks for itself with regard to the interplay of knowledge, power, and subject.

Since Michael Bergunder's article "Umkämpfte Historisierung" is one of the most recent proposals for genealogy in the study of religion, I have analyzed the extent to which it meets its demands. He convincingly commits himself to the program of genealogy in the theoretical part of his article. The attached sample study, however, describes solely in terms of the history of ideas how a global reconstitution of 'religion' as 'inwardness' and 'esotericism' as 'a linking of religion and science' occurred in the 19th century. It remains unclear why such a religion does not represent a Protestant concept of religion in the succession of Friedrich Schleiermacher. This question arises especially because he focuses pri-

marily on Protestant contexts. Bergunder does not conduct a power analysis, does not link his study to Foucault's theses on subjectification, and does not comment on his own position with regard to religion. Overall, therefore, his account reads more like a legitimization of a specific protestant understanding of religion rather than a critique of it. Thus, it does not represent a genealogy in Foucault's sense.

In the following, the concept of religion as a social system was analyzed in a genealogy of its own. In this understanding of religion, inwardness represents only a subjective or individual aspect of religion alongside other external and social dimensions such as rites, symbols, and membership. Moreover, religion works off a specific program, the distinction and mediation of transcendence and immanence. This distinguishes it from other social systems such as law, economics, or politics. I locate the birth of such a religion in the rites controversies. Since the 16th century, especially the Jesuits in Malabar in India developed the missionary strategy of *accommodation* in exchange with and in competition to other local elites. This aimed at spreading the Christian occidental faith, but without having to transform the entire society into a European one. To this end, they invented a new distinction between what they classified as religious and as civil or political. They also interpreted the rites and signs that qualified as religious in a nominalist way. The decisive factor was the faithful intention with which the individual made use of certain signs and rites that could vary in form and language. However, the thus legitimized adaptation to Indian culture could not prevail as a strategy among Europeans. After initial approval, Rome forbade accommodation. It represented colonization solely in terms of internal beliefs and a reinterpretation of local rites and signs. However, it abstained from political and economic colonization. Thus, it contradicted the interests of the Portuguese and their *Padroado* in India, which was based on an all-encompassing colonization.

It remains the task of genealogy to analyze how religion was further constituted in the interplay of subject, power, and knowledge in the following centuries and which battles were fought with it and about it. How religion was understood in each case was always related to the general role of religion in society, and in particular, which roles individual religions were to play in a society. It is not an innocent category of observation, but power struggles of influence have been being fought over it until this very day—also by scholars of religion.