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General introduction

The work of the research group ‘Religious individualisation in historical perspective’, which began in 2008 at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Study at the University of Erfurt (Germany), has finally come to an end. The research group (or ‘Kollegforschergruppe’ in German) was generously funded by the German Science Foundation (‘Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft’, DFG) and was intellectually embedded in the vibrant and rigorous multi-disciplinary atmosphere and deliberative culture of the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt. The research group consisted of more than 120 members, including the core team at Erfurt, the long-term fellows from all over the world who joined us for one or more years, the many short-term fellows who spent weeks or months with us in Erfurt, and the countless conference participants who were kind enough to loan us their expertise for a few days at a time.

This publication draws together important lines of investigation pursued by the research group during the last ten years. Transcending selves, dividual self, conventions and contentions and, finally, authorities are the four perspectives that inform and explore processes of ‘religious individualisation’ in this publication and constitute its four Parts. Starting from the mechanisms of *religious* individualisation, we explore the agents, characteristics, patterns, and dynamics of such processes. We focus on human actors, both as they cast themselves and as they were constructed or conceived in different periods and across different regions, and examine how they were embedded in social webs and how agency was asserted, ascribed, or denied. We discuss how agency was appropriated and modified and, at the same time, shaped and produced by its various contexts. We look into economic, political, and legal conditions and constraints, but also into cultural practices and everyday discourses, as well as the expert discourses of philosophers and theologians, as well as locally embedded intellectuals and their trans-local counterparts. The 53 contributions to this publication address the spaces and patterns of individualisation and de-individualisation in each case,

Note: The authors are grateful to those members of the research group, who have been co-authors to texts on which we are drawing here, in particular Riccarda Suitner and Wolfgang Spickerman. William Sullivan translated a working text, of which passages are being used here.

as well as the tensions produced in the course of these developments; power relationships as well as processes of protest and marginalisation; and, finally, the processes of de-, re-, and neo-traditionalisation.

Each Part of the publication is preceded by an introduction that situates the discussion and familiarises the reader with the concepts employed in all the Part's subdivisions ('Sections'). It is, however, the afterwords, reflections shared by the authors of each Section, that set the publication apart. All the authors of the publication met for nearly a week to discuss, criticise, strengthen, and reshape their contributions, as well as to identify common themes, threads, and missing perspectives. Thus, we invite readers to start either from the beginning or from the many ends of this publication. As will become clear on reading them, many of the chapters contribute to several of the systematic aspects of the publication and are also relevant to other Sections and Parts.

Accordingly, this general introduction does not offer summaries of the summaries or meta-reflections on the meta-reflections. Rather, it introduces the work of the research group 'Religious individualisation in historical perspective' on a larger scale. The quantity of individual historical 'outputs' produced by the research group in the ongoing process of applying and reshaping the concept of 'individualisation' cannot be summarised even in a massive publication like this. If forced to sum up the findings of the group with regard to this concept, we might say that the gist of the many contributions is both critical and revisionist. It is 'critical' in that many contributions have been directed against the monopolisation of the term 'individualisation' by advocates of the modernisation theory that dominates everyday discourses. It is 'revisionist' in that our group members have often argued against a historiographical perspective that assumes all 'premodern' cultures to be essentially collective or collectivist (with the exception of a few 'big individuals'). Thus, following the example of the first report of the research group, published in 2013 (Joas and Rüpke 2013, now online and open access: https://www.db-thueringen.de/receive/dbt_mods_00034459), we will briefly sketch our starting point and then introduce the wider field of research questions tackled, as well as significant results.

1 Master narratives of individuality and individualisation in the history of religion

Contrary to received preconceptions and common assumptions, 'individualisation' offers a window not only into present societies but also into those of the past, as well as into the history of religions more generally (see Rüpke 2016a, used in the following). It might be helpful to once again look back at the origins of an estab-

lished master narrative, the questioning of which was the analytical starting point of the research group. Examining empirical data back in the early 1960s, Thomas Luckmann pointed, in the context of his analysis of contemporary religion, to the growth of American churchd religion and conceived of this as indicative of individualisation (Luckmann 1967, an enlarged version in German: Luckmann 1991). However, ‘individualisation’ is generally regarded in sociological discourse as a distinguishing feature of the modern age far beyond the realm of religion and as one of the dominant characteristics of ‘modernity’. Such views usually – although not in Luckmann’s case – lose sight of the paradoxical rise of mass culture as a concomitant mode of integration. Even when one takes into account that sociological theories of modernity differ in the degree of importance they assign to individualisation, individualisation nevertheless has a firm place within all classical sociological accounts of modernisation (as demonstrated by Flavia Kippele [1998], Kron and Horáček [2009], and others). Viewed from this perspective, religion appears as negatively related to the process of individualisation. With the exception of a few thinkers, such as Georg Simmel (1968) and later Luckmann himself, religion has been seen as having fallen prey to the processes characterised by individualisation.

From the perspective of ‘History of Religion’, it is worth taking a closer look at the narratives of historical processes that were thought to form the basis of the equation of individualisation with modernity. These narratives take quite different forms. In his famous study of the Italian Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt (1860, 141) claimed that interest in subjectivity had risen considerably in the European context from the end of the thirteenth century. Later studies showed how in this period new and ground-breaking philosophical, aesthetic, philological, and religious alternatives, as well as new institutions, helped create spaces of critique and distance towards what became regarded as ‘traditional’ society and practices (e.g. Martin 2004). With the coming of the Renaissance, for instance, ‘paganism’ became not only an aesthetic form but also a religious alternative (see Hanegraaff 2012; for another position see Stausberg 2009).

The processes of religious individualisation that can be identified in these contexts drew inspiration from late medieval practices of religious piety. Later, in the early sixteenth century, the Reformation made religion the object of individual choice. While the dominant Aristotelian and Scholastic paradigms had come under scrutiny in the early years of the Renaissance, reformers now questioned again another dominant religious tradition, that is Catholicism. In this case, however, the orthodox interpretations were not only supplanted by intellectual and artistic enterprises but were, instead, openly fought against. Max Weber’s (1864–1920) thesis on the post-Reformation Protestant ethic is an especially trenchant example of this trend, with its emphasis on the turn to inner-worldly asceticism, the responsibility of each individual for his/her life, and the ‘rational-

ization of the conduct of life [*Lebensführung*] – now in the world yet still oriented to the supernatural [*Jenseits*] –’ as the ‘effect of ascetic Protestantism’s concept of calling’ (Weber [1920] 2011, 157).

The first cracks in the Western self-image of a primarily, if not exclusively, modern Western origin of (religious) individualisation become visible in the context of Weber’s comparative analysis of Eurasian ‘world-religions’ and civilisations. With respect to India in particular, Weber made what he called its ‘intellectual’ religions, or soteriologies, a repository of the most pronounced and systematically developed attitudes of world-indifference and world-rejection available to the cultivated individual. Weber denied that this individualising attitude impacted life in the world and that these modes of religiosity reached the majority of lay people or the lower sections of society (what he called the ‘masses’). Weber saw developments in India, and in all other non-Western civilisations, as dead-ends. For him, only Protestant individualisation allowed a breakthrough to the practical individualisation of life in the world, the ‘ability and disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct [*praktisch-rationale Lebensführung*]’ (Weber 2004a, 109; see also 1996, 250, 359 / 1958, 325¹; Fuchs 1988, 138ff., 277ff.; 2017, 227, 254).

Louis Dumont (1911–1998) developed Weber’s agenda in another direction and proposed the figure of the Indian world-renouncer (*saṃnyāsin*, *śramaṇa*) as probably the earliest form of religious individualisation, albeit one that was already highly diversified. The ideal-typical renouncer, who broke loose from social bonds, became conceived of as the ‘individual-outside-the-world’ (Dumont 1980, 185, 267–86; for this and the following see Fuchs 1988, 417ff., 453–525). Dumont argued that, in societies of the ‘traditional, holistic type’, individualism could generally only occur in clear opposition to (and thus for him ‘outside’) society (Dumont 1986, 26); societies composed of self-oriented individualists are a modern phenomenon. However, Dumont also regarded the ‘otherworldly individual’ as the ‘motor’ and ‘main agent’ of historical developments in India, not only in the religious field but also in the political and even economic realms (Dumont 1965, 91; 1975a, 64; 1975b, 163). In addition, Dumont advanced a strong thesis that Indian brands of religious individualisation might have functioned as an important direct or indirect trigger of religious individualisation in the eastern Mediterranean during antiquity. They would, thus, have influenced Greek philosophers and early Christians, and through this the West more broadly (the reference here is to the gymnosophists or ‘naked sages’, as *yogins* were called in the Mediterranean). The category of the (otherworldly) individual, Dumont speculates, ‘might have been invented only once’ in history, thus making India appear

1 N.B: The English translation of Weber [1921] 1996 – Weber 1958 – is not reliable.

as the world-historical origin of (religious) individualisation (Dumont 1975b, 168; 1986, 29). In his view, it was only during the history of Western Christianity that the move from ‘otherworldly’ to ‘innerworldly’ individualism was made. The decisive steps in this direction were, he thought, taken first by Calvin and then, secondly, by Luther. In a first phase, the religious authorities of the church and the pope were made superior to the more worldly powers of the emperor and nobles; in a second phase, the will of the individual became identified with God’s will, allowing the individual will to reign without restriction (1986, ch. 1). Dumont’s views remain partial and one-sided due to his strict separation between individualizing religion and ‘traditional’ society. The society conceived by him as strictly ‘holistic’ denies especially the lower sections any agency or individual subjecthood. This is due to his depreciation of other sources of religious individualisation in India as well as elsewhere. Regarding the Indian case, Dumont, like Weber before him, especially downplayed the relevance of *bhakti*. Despite this, he acknowledged that *bhakti* makes it possible, in the context of ‘traditional’ Indian society, that ‘one can leave the world *from within*’ and that all people ‘can become free individuals’ (Dumont 1980, 282f., emphasis added; cf. Fuchs 2018).

Even elaborate analyses such as these, which detected forms of individualisation in the pre-modern and non-Christian world, were still imbued with strong traces of Orientalist stereotyping and of the Western tradition of ‘othering’ the non-Western world (Fuchs 1988). While they might have given an important historical role to the Asian ‘other’, they continued to consider both the modern religious and secular forms of individualisation to be more authentic and more historically advanced. While scholars such as Weber and Dumont reflect the beginnings of an awareness of the wide array of modes of religious individualisation, the understanding that individualisation is a distinguishing mark of the unique Western modernity nevertheless remained largely prevalent. This led other scholars to insinuate that individuals belonging to certain non-European or pre-modern cultures lack even the possibility of formulating any opposition of interests between ‘themselves’ and ‘society’. Such views have been strongly and successfully criticised by anthropologists (e.g. Spiro 1993; see also Part 2 and the concept of dividuality). Recent work on the religion of pre-modern and pre-Christian antiquity, usually characterised as ‘collective’, has produced similar results. The extensive ancient discussions about religious deviance and attempts to legally standardise religious behaviour attest to the perception and acceptance of an extensive religious individuality practiced in many different forms (Rüpke 2011, 2016c).

Meanwhile, the Western world’s exceptional self-description as ‘modern’ has been critically challenged in the global non-West. This critique takes either the form of pointing to the historical inappropriateness of such claims to singularity,

or the form of a counter-stereotype, elevating Eastern collectivity over supposed Western individuality (cf. Asad 1973, 1983). Conceptually linking the modern age and religious individuality has obstructed the study of comparable phenomena in earlier periods, so that individuality and individualisation have played only a limited role in the examination of the dynamics of religion in history. The case of *bhakti* in India has already been mentioned. *Bhakti* – a blanket term for a wide range of phenomena and strands – allows individual devotion; various forms of *bhakti* connect with a critique of both social and religious restrictions. For Mediterranean antiquity, some conceptions of *polis* religion or civic religion have claimed that the religious practices of the political elite and their definitions of legitimate religious actions were the only significant sector of religion in their polities. The variety and changeability of individual religious actions and their profound influence on those rituals called ‘public’ by the elite, have been disregarded, leading to an emphasis on the collective and the fundamentally different character of pre-modern societies (see Rüpke 2007, 5–38; Kindt 2012, 12–35 for criticism). In a similar vein, the assumption of the religious unity of medieval Europe (see Borgolte 2001 for criticism) is just a counterpart of the assumptive self-description of modern societies, implied in the secularisation thesis, as pluralistic. In contrast to such conventional wisdom, recent research focussing on the history of Western esotericism and learned magic has unveiled a variety of individualising impulses and strands that have informed Western cultural and religious history from late antiquity onwards (see von Stuckrad 2010; Otto 2011; Hanegraaff 2012; Otto 2016, 2017; Bellingradt and Otto 2017; Otto 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The diagnosis of modern individualisation and the ascription of a public and collective character to pre-modern religion are mutually reinforcing frameworks.

However, such observations and criticisms cannot overlook the fact that religious individuality is distributed unevenly even in situations characterised by processes of individualisation which affect or transform religion. In identifying the Renaissance as a turning point, Burckhardt did not deny the existence of dissenters in the preceding centuries. What made a difference in the 14th century, and what constituted individualisation as a process, was not, as the traditional historical narrative has it, the presence of individual intellectuals such as Petrarch (1304–1374). Rather, the defining feature was the increasingly large number of people interested in technical and economic matters, as well as in the subjective dimension of human existence. Mere numbers cannot provide a metric for assessing the scale of this phenomenon. One needs to identify, rather, the contexts, the intellectual, discursive, and practical (e.g. ritual) forms of manifestation, as well as the consequences within a given local society. Even in ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ societies, the acclaimed form of ‘individuality’ might turn out to be very partial, or even only illusory (see Kron and Horáček 2009, 151f.).

Consideration of contemporary religion in the USA shows that ‘individuality’ is not a straightforward characteristic of ‘modern’ religion, as is claimed by those who argue for the privatisation of religion. ‘Individuality’, as a framework of interpretation as well as a form of behaviour, is primarily found among mobile members of the white middle class. For them, ‘individuality’ as a concept is confirmed by their own commitment and its social consequences (Madsen 2009, 1279–82). This emic concept of ‘individuality’ is not an arbitrary option within a range of possible privatised sacred *cosmoi*. On the contrary, it is a concept developed by a specific group, albeit one that carries a hegemonic character. It is a way of life that is dominant in the eyes of the entire society, even if the whole society does not participate (*ibid.*). There is an important consequence to this, historically as well as sociologically: certain religious traditions might have or develop practices of self-reflection that are able to foster individuality. The institutionalisation of such tendencies, however, and its conceptualisation as ‘individuality’ is a matter of historical contexts and social location.

2 Looking into religious individualisation – in a nutshell

Before going into further detail, a brief overview is necessary. As indicated above, the ‘Kollegforschergruppe’ – or in short KFG, as we used to call it – began by formulating a critique of modernisation theory. The intention was to then bolster this by demonstrating that phenomena that might well be called ‘individualisation’ were existent *and* important in pre-modern and non-Western cultures. However, in the years since we have pushed forward and beyond this analytical starting point in at least three directions.

- a) With regard to modernisation theory, the independence of ‘individualisation’ from other crucial factors all too easily bundled together as ‘modernisation’ has been sufficiently demonstrated (e.g. Bellah and Joas 2012; Deuser and Wendel 2012; Joas 2012, 2013a, 2013b). ‘Individualisation’ has, thus, been set free as an analytical term that is useful beyond Western ‘modernity’, or even multiple ‘modernities’ (Fuchs, Linkenbach and Reinhard 2015; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015a; Mieth and Müller-Schauenburg 2012; Mieth 2014; Mieth 2016; Mulder-Bakker et al. 2017; Otto 2016, 2017, 2018a; Reinhardt 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Rosenberger 2013; Rüpke 2011, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016c; Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Suitner 2016; Vinzent 2011; Vinzent 2014).
- b) With regard to the history of religion, many phenomena and processes came to the fore when we set aside the lenses of collectivism and looked instead

for anything comparable to ‘individualisation’ (see Otto 2017 and further below). In particular, narratives of ancient and post-ancient (‘medieval’ or ‘early modern’, in terms of West-European epochs) circum-Mediterranean, European, and West and South Asian religions have changed and gained new facets far beyond the work of the group itself. Concepts such as ‘self’ and ‘agency’, ‘subject’ and ‘personhood’, ‘individuation’ and ‘personal identity’ have been taken on board, and at the same time critically examined, in our attempt to develop more fine-grained concepts and descriptions (Fuchs 2015; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015b; Hartung and Schlette 2012; Hollstein, Jung and Knöbl 2011; Lichterman 2013; Messlin 2012; Ram 2013; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015b; Rüpke 2012a, 2015c, 2016b; Rüpke and Woolf 2013; Schlette 2013; see also Parson in this publication).

- c) Finally, reflection has turned towards the very concepts with which we started. How are concepts of ‘religion’ shaped by the aforementioned master narrative of ‘modern Western individualisation’ (Otto, Rau and Rüpke 2015; Rüpke 2018b)? How is the normative character of the concept of the ‘individual’, whenever it is implied that one should *be* an individual, informed by such a narrative? How has the master narrative affected concepts of ‘history’ and ‘change’? The paradoxical consequences of securing individuality by processes of institutionalisation (e.g., through ritualisation, group formation, the establishment of textual canons and traditions, etc.) as well as backlashes into de- or non-individualisation have come into view. Looking more closely at the individual has also brought to light features of personhood that do not easily comply with linear and uni-directional individualisation narratives. Even in (early) modernity, individualisation processes do not lead to a fully ‘bounded’ self-contained individual. The individual person always exhibits permeability, vulnerability, and openness towards the outer and the social world in various degrees, as s/he is also capable of parting and pluralising him/herself in order to navigate multiple belongings, personalities, and allegiances (see Taylor 2007 and Part 2 of this publication). Unravelling relational and partible aspects of the self has forced us to postulate a co-constitutive relation between what we call ‘dividuality’ and individuality. All this has affected our view onto historical and contemporary societies and schools of thought, from a sociological and anthropological perspective (Fuchs 2015; Rüpke 2015c) as well as in terms of intellectual and ritual history (e.g. Mulsow 2012, 2015; Ben-Tov, Deutsch and Herzig 2013; Otto 2016; Bellingradt and Otto 2017; Otto 2018a, 2018b).

Regarding the very concept of ‘religious individualisation’, and in stark contrast to the master narrative referred to above – which usually conceives religious

individualisation as a more or less unambiguous or self-explanatory social process –, we arrived at the conclusion that religious individualisation should rather be understood as a polythetic umbrella term, i.e. as a heuristic tool rather than a clear-cut semantic signifier of specific social dynamics (Fuchs 2015; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015a; Otto 2017). Our work revealed that religious individualisation, similar to other polythetic categories, entails a large number of semantic notions, which are evoked by different scholars on different occasions and with regard to different observations, thus hampering interdisciplinary or even basic inter-subjective understandings of the matter. Inspired but also frustrated by such misunderstandings, and through comparing a large number of case studies and sub-projects, a semantic matrix emerged that maps different notions of religious individualisation, grouped in four basic domains. This matrix is provided here in an abbreviated version (based on the original version published in Otto 2017, 33–6). This narrative rendering of the matrix also includes more recent contributions.

Religious individualisation is said to encompass (or to underlie):

- (A) Notions focusing on an enhanced range of individual options or choices: de-traditionalisation; de-institutionalisation; pluralisation (see also Section 4.2 in this publication); privatisation (see Rüpke 2016a); individuality may become a normative ideal, a ‘cult’ (Kron and Horáček 2009, 120–4), it may become mainstream and compulsory; striving for authenticity or alleged uniqueness; enhanced religious self-determination (Mieth 2017); ongoing recalibrations and reinterpretations of tradition (leading to manifold variations and thus pluralisation: Parson in this publication; Renzi forthcoming); novel religious syncretisms and eclecticism initiated through cultural contacts and exchange (see Fuchs, Linkenbach, and Reinhard 2015, and below on ‘interconnections’); conventionalisations (in the sense of stable, formalised and recognised conventions and practices, which regulate and stabilise individual initiatives in societal forms: see Mulder-Bakker in this publication); the religious market model (thus granting religious tolerance and competition: see Hermann-Pillath in this publication); strategic use of dividuality or of multiple personae to enhance one’s options (see articles in Section 2.2 in this volume).
- (B) Notions focusing on self and creativity: creative, independent, original thinking on religion; developing or creating religious ideas, concepts, choices, norms, practices; reforming or inventing religions; enhanced focus on the ‘self’ or individual salvation; development of religious self-reflection, and of the idea of an individual religious identity or ‘selfhood’, eventually accompanied by moments of liberation; struggle for distinctiveness from the religious ‘other’ (see also Murphy in this publication); awareness of individual responsibility for one’s actions, of moral responsibility, or the formation of a sophisticated concept of conscience; development of the notion of human

- dignity and/or individual human rights, or of the ‘conception of the unique value of one’s own personhood’ (Gordon 2015, 368); creative re-interpretations of religious self-concepts in the light of crisis, such as repressions, diaspora, or war (see Michael Nijhawan’s piece on ‘precarious diasporas’ in this publication); development of the notion of a permeable or multi-dimensional self (see Part 2 in this publication); narratives of extraordinary, charismatic, or outstanding religious figures or ‘authors’ (see Section 3.2 in this publication); biographic transformations with regard to religious selves and identities, e.g. through conversion (see Suitner in this publication).
- (C) Notions focusing on deviance and critique (see also Part 4 in this publication): individual appropriations that lead to deviations from established religious or ritual norms (consider material often subsumed under the heading of so-called ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ religion; see also Raja and Rüpke in this publication); social, cultural, and/or religious ‘dis-embeddedness, temporary rupture of social bonds’ (Rüpke 2013, 13); intellectual ‘autonomy’ (as opposed to ‘heteronomy’) while thinking about religious matters (see, for example, Malinar or Müller-Schauenburg in this publication); questioning established religious norms, concepts, persons, and/or institutions; openly criticising established religious norms, concepts, persons, and/or institutions (this notion is stronger than the former, which may be private; see also Fuchs in this publication); consciously choosing to engage in religious heterodoxy or heteropraxy; consciously writing or practicing the forbidden while risking persecution or even death; open rebellion or revolt against established religious norms or institutions.
- (D) Notions focusing on experience: forms of inwardness (‘Innerlichkeit’: Fuchs 2015, 335); focus on individual, experience-based ‘spirituality’; special attention given to ‘intuition’ and other forms of inspired knowledge; intense religious experiences, e.g. direct encounters with the divine (also through possessions: see Malik in this publication), or in the form of individually determined exploration of the inner self (see Parson in this publication), which may lead to individualised off-book perspectives on religious matters (partly inspired by prophecy or divination: see also Eidinow and Facchini in this publication); traditional experience-based religious paths towards individual liberation, enlightenment, or divine union (for example, in Christian mysticism, monastic Buddhism, or Indian *bhakti* traditions); ideas and practices that foster self-transcendence (see Part 1, particularly Mieth in this publication).

It is crucial to understand that this matrix does not represent a ‘typology’ or even a full-fledged theory of religious individualisation. We see it, rather, as a discursive collage of meanings that have been ascribed to religious individualisation

within and beyond our research group. Heterogenous as this matrix may appear at first sight, it has proven to be a useful tool in scanning for indications of individualisation, as well as in comparing different cases and individuals. If one interprets the matrix as a heuristic ‘net of notions’, it may be applied to religious data – either partially or in its entirety – in order to elucidate whether a certain case is relevant for the study of religious individualisation, which domains and/or notions are triggered by the material, and which are dominant or marginal. This procedure, which has also been called ‘polysemantic analysis’ (Otto 2017, 51), may be carried out either individually or as a collaborative endeavour, with the latter approach allowing for a more fine-grained intercultural comparison – for instance, by comparing specific notions across case studies from different religious, geographical, or historical contexts.

Whether these different notions and domains actually refer to a coherent field (ultimately in the sense of a ‘homeostatic property cluster’: see Otto 2017, 39f., and further Stausberg and Gardiner 2016) or, rather, to various types of phenomena subsumed under the same umbrella for pragmatic or other reasons, is open to debate. In a way, the matrix reflects a new attempt to deal with the persistent problem of so-called ‘critical categories’ in the Study of Religion, i.e., with the problem of defining an analytical category in the (post-)modern humanities without falling into the traps of either deconstructionism or conceptual vagueness and arbitrariness. The advantage of our polysemantic approach is (1) that all semantic facets of the category are preserved and thus enter the analysis (in contrast to monothetic working definitions which usually suppress undesired semantic notions), and (2) that the concept under scrutiny is never fixed nor stable, but remains flexible and open to revisions, recalibrations, and extensions in the light of new findings. Despite its ambiguities and fluidities, the matrix has turned out to be a useful heuristic tool for identifying and comparing different patterns and facets of religious individualisation both diachronically and cross-culturally.

We differentiate the concept of religion in a similar fashion for heuristic purposes. In order to obtain a grasp of the subject that can comprehend and compare religious individualisations from antiquity to the present, from Western Europe to the west Asian and Indian regions (with brief forays into East Asian contexts), from large-scale Christian organisations to contexts of religious pluralism and diffuse religiosity, from individual practices to temple ritual to academic theology, it is necessary to have a sufficiently broad concept of religion available as a working tool. ‘Sufficiently broad’ does not, however, mean gathering together as many or as few as possible of the conventional *topoi* provided by definitions of religion. For the purposes of this project, the object ‘religion’, with its ongoing processes of individual appropriation on the local and trans-local levels, is understood as a permanently changing system of orientation (‘religion in the making’)

that has a peculiar but always precarious status within the cultural context to which it relates. It is also understood that ‘religion’:

- in its content refers to some principle transcending the everyday that often appears in the form of personal gods but can also appear in different grades of the ‘supernatural’;
- communicates this orientation through a wide spectrum of media, in which rituals and specific (‘holy’) objects and stories play a prominent role and in which various forms of systematisation (‘doctrine’) can appear;
- provides directions for action in the form of both worldviews and norms about how to conduct one’s life; nevertheless, the impact and consequences of these norms and worldviews always depends on their appropriation (and hence also modification) by individuals;
- can assume a solidified institutional character in a variety of forms, which may range from individual charismatic ‘providers’ and their ‘clients’ or ‘students’ to ‘lay associations’ and other membership concepts as well as religious elites who can set limits or open up manoeuvring room for individual appropriations; and finally,
- in its concrete implementation constitutes a place of intensive interconnection across cultural, spatial, and temporal boundaries. The term ‘system of orientation’ brings together under one heading attempts to answer the problem of defining the relationship between individual action and social groupings (for the above cf. Fuchs and Rüpke 2015b).

3 Looking into religious individualisation – widening the perspective

Discovering and documenting these different facets and processes of religious individualisation from other times and places opens up a broad but neglected field for empirical research in which special weight is placed on comparing and tracing the interactions between different religious and cultural traditions. Yet this approach also requires that we consider the implications this research has for social theory and the history of religion. Our central focus has been defined by the following five hypotheses:

- 1) *Religious individualisation* is not just a phenomenon specific to modern Europe but also a useful *heuristic category* for the study of historical processes across very different religious and cultural contexts, whether approached as religions (Islam, Buddhism), regions (Western, Southern and Eastern Asia,

also areas in Europe such as the Iberian Peninsula), and time periods. This requires a critical approach to translation and terminology, a broadening and rethinking of concepts by including other experiences and narratives and other forms and trajectories of individualisation (Fuchs 2015). The application of religious individualisation as a heuristic to interpret diverse cultural and historical contexts (whether inspired by the above matrix or not) starts from a polemical intention to search in a way that goes against the grain. As we uncovered other types or facets of religious individualisation originating in other places, we were increasingly able to contextualise the kinds of individualising processes that are more or less familiar to us and establish relationships among them with greater sensitivity.

- 2) These processes of religious individualisation should be understood less as isolated phenomena and more as reworkings of, or reactions to, religious experiences, traditions, and discourses. Thus, the contexts in which processes of individualisation take shape remain highly significant, as do the practices and ideas from which specific actors distance themselves or which they try to revise. At the same time, looking for the contexts of processes of religious individualisation opens the way for additional (religious) options and traditions to become visible. Meanwhile, constellations of cultural entanglements can also come to the fore as important triggers of individualising strands. The chapters in this publication demonstrate that the investigation of the history of individualisation is, in many cases, an *investigation of the history of interconnections* which examines the different ways in which cultural boundaries have been crossed. By ‘history of interconnections’ we mean an inquiry in the sense of ‘entangled history’ or ‘histoire croisée’, which analyses the reciprocal interactions and transfers between different cultural contexts, regions, religions, and reference systems. Such an inquiry involves an increased focus on ‘boundary-crossing’ interactions and exchanges, in which diverse cultural and religious traditions encounter one another and ideas and practices that strengthen or trigger individualisation processes are transferred. In addition to the question of how particular institutions (such as rights of religious groups) are implemented and how forgotten practices (individual confession) and discourses (‘prophecy’) are rediscovered, the question of possible interactions is particularly exciting. Migrations of ideas as well as practices and their effects created complex interactions with consequences for religion long before the great breakdowns of tradition within and outside Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Seen from this angle, the insights gathered by our research group can be used to trace the vertical, or ‘deep time’, dimension of these processes of transformation. In the present and for the future, the ever-increasing interaction and interconnection among

cultural strands and trends of diverse origin taking place amid intensified and divergent processes of globalisation is striking.

- 3) Given that many processes of religious individualisation are closely connected to the formation of institutions, traditionalisation, and conventionalisation, the interactions among these processes must be systematically examined (see foremost Part 3 in this publication). Such kinds of institutionalisation processes can (but need not necessarily) have the paradoxical effect of again limiting the scope of individualisation. *Individualisation and de-individualisation* are in many cases intertwined. Institutional protection of individual practices creates at one and the same time an awareness of the possibilities for heteropraxy or heterodoxy and the tools to counteract these through standardisation. Such mutual reactions may then again increase the power of dissent, but also the emphatic rejection of alternatives. Hence, even processes such as the creation of canons, traditions, or forms of fundamentalism can be revisited rewardingly in the light and in the context of individualisation processes, if one keeps an eye on the ambiguities involved in such processes. Religious individualisation – provided it is not taken to mean a one-way path to modernisation – thus designates contingent processes of personal religious exploration and of the cultural or social groundings of such explorations and their respective articulations. The boundary crossings and feedback loops are processes inherent to individual actions as well as to the creation of communities or standardisation at an institutional level. Furthermore, relapses into de-individualisation not only constrain individuals but may also create free spaces for new forms of individualisation. This is precisely the reason why concepts such as ‘self’, ‘individualism’, or ‘religious geniuses’ do *not* structure our publication. Formulations like ‘Transcending Selves’, ‘The Dividual Self’, ‘Conventions and Contentions’, and ‘Authorities’ have, instead, been chosen as the organising principles of the four Parts.
- 4) The perspectives just outlined allow for the development of an alternative or even complementary narrative to the aforementioned master narrative of ‘modern Western individualisation’. Here, *the concept of ‘dividuality’* comes into play, not only with regard to ‘non-Western’ perspectives but also by comparing the multiple Western and non-Western modernities. Various authors with an anthropological background, such as Edward LiPuma (1998; 2001) and Alfred Gell (1999; 2013), but also Charles Taylor, the philosopher of the modern self (Taylor 1989, 2007), have started to point out (two) different co-existing dimensions of personhood found across time and space, including in the modern West. Of these, one is more individual and the other more dividual. The altered awareness offered by the concept of dividuality is reflected in the contributions contained in Part 2 of this publication. Dividuality is,

on the one hand, traced as the dynamic foundation of human sociality and individuality (see the articles in Section 2.1) and, on the other hand, as a lived social reality and concrete social praxis in particular societies and social contexts (see the articles in Section 2.2 and 2.3). The socio-historical perspective in particular helps to reveal concealed histories of dividualisation that run alongside individualisation as its complement, and which have, paradoxically, often facilitated individual and distinct standpoints by means of dividualising strategies (for example, in the form of literary practices, such as the play with different pseudonyms used by a single author, or the opposition between author and private individual; see Section 2.2).

- 5) In the history of theory, the concept of individualisation has mostly served as a Eurocentric strategy of exclusion. Likewise, the concept of religion has often turned the collective into an absolute value that has been attributed especially to pre-modern or non-Western areas. Based on the KFG's results, and through confrontation with the history of scholarly research in this area, a *concept of religion* has been developed that makes it possible to reconstruct the study of religion in the context of historical processes of individualisation and interconnectedness while avoiding the pitfalls of Eurocentrism. With these theoretical reflections (Fuchs 2015; Rüpke 2015c; Otto 2017; Albrecht et al. 2018), new large-scale narratives (such as Joas 2012; Rüpke 2018a), and the work collected in the present publication, we are aiming at nothing less than a redefinition of the concept of religion by challenging the prevailing view, which locates religion in the collective, the institutional, and the standardised.

This prevailing supposition about religion has informed scholarly choices, determining what issues receive analytical attention and what groupings, behaviours, or beliefs merit being described as 'religion'. It has also had a decided influence on the portrayal of religion in other disciplines. Our hypothesis, based on our previous findings and those provided set out in this publication, is that a new conception of religion is needed, a conception that envisages an intrinsic and reciprocal relationship between the individual and the social (brokered by interconnections and processes of individualisation and de-individualisation). Taking the concept of religious individualisation as an analytical starting point of an inquiry that is sensitive to both contingency and context, it is possible to reorient the study of religion towards a perspective that systematically acknowledges processes of individualisation and entanglement. Individuals act religiously whenever they communicate with at least situationally available non-human addressees (whether those are situated within or beyond that context) to whom they ascribe agency and render such action plausible by routinely and strategically

appropriating traditional semantics. As a consequence, religious action entails ascription of agency to patrons and/or audiences, processes of groupings, as well as competition and distinction. Religion, hence, should be analysed and described as lived religion and religion in the making.

4 Implications and perspectives

The present publication, despite its size, does not intend to offer the final word for research on processes of religious individualisation and their manifold histories. Rather, by consolidating our present knowledge, it offers a starting point for further research. Within this larger horizon, we propose the continuation and expansion of research in five particular fields:

4.1 Individualisation and religious (and cultural) entanglements

While starting from local contexts and specific forms of religious individualisation, further attention must be given to interactions and interconnecting processes among concurrent religious strands, as well as to the transmission of practices and beliefs across the boundaries of different social groups and ways of life. Whether within or across continental or subcontinental spaces, detailed historical and ethnographical studies must be combined with the investigation of geographically wide-ranging and *longue-durée* processes of transferral (Mulsow 2018). What we can expect to emerge from this field of research is a deeper understanding of the reciprocal effects between micro- and macro-phenomena, ranging from religious idiosyncrasies of intellectual intermediaries, nonconformists, and long-distance travellers to processes of group formation that make use of new conceptualisations and forms of individualised practices. Two aspects deserve particular attention here:

- a) *Cultural brokers*: For Norbert Elias, it was migrating scholars of the Renaissance period who were the first people to whom processes of individualisation can be ascribed (Elias 2001). By contrast, our combined work has shown that such impulses are by no means to be found only in Europe or from the early modern period onwards, but also in ancient and medieval as well as non-European societies, not least in South Asia. In the context of religion, such processes emerge above all when they coincide with phases of ‘religionification’ (thus Rüpke 2010) or religious pluralisation, as for example

in the Roman imperial period and over broad stretches of the religious history of India. India was, for most of its history, characterised by a high degree of religious diversity. Religious ideas and religious groups could not but have other religious modes and concepts in view when elaborating their own practices and perspectives. This has led to lively exchanges, to demarcations, to all kinds of combinations, as well as to disputations and struggles, and there were many constellations in which social actors did not make any particular distinction between the various religious strands or pedigrees (Fuchs 2018, 141–3; Linkenbach 2016; Parson in this publication and forthcoming). Such constellations allowed an unending stream of new individualising forms and stances that have not, so far, been exhaustively explored. In the European context, demands for religious individualisation have always been present in deviant intellectual or ritual (and partly underground) traditions, such as certain strands of Western esotericism or learned magic (see on the latter Otto 2016); yet, at certain moments and in particular places, they also increased on a broader societal scale, as, for instance, during certain phases of the Middle Ages or during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Central Europe. In such phases one can investigate such things as, taking pre-modern Europe as an example, ‘pluralised exiles’ (thus Mulsow 2010) and correspondingly pluralised migrants, who could use their plural identities to increase their own options for religious action. These learned migrants were both products of interconnections and entanglements and actors who pushed such interconnections further by developing religious ‘syncretisms’ and even by means of cultural ‘misunderstandings’, bringing together currents from different cultural backgrounds (App 2014, 11–23; Mulsow 2018, 22–6). The encounter between the Portuguese Jesuit Monserrate and the Mughal ruler Akbar provides an example of this multi-faceted plurality in the context of the cross-civilisational circulation of millenarian ideas in the sixteenth century (Subrahmanyam 2005; see also Kouroshi 2015; Fuchs, Linkenbach and Reinhard 2015). Like other ‘marginal men’, they carried knowledge of their cultures of origin into other regions and manifest simultaneously a special receptivity to foreign ideas.

The investigation of these special groups of ‘cultural brokers’, often members of elite but sometimes also of subaltern classes (Nath Yogis, Sufis, Roman military personnel), permits – where the sources are available – the examination of questions that can otherwise scarcely be answered. One starting point here is the question of how experiences of religious contacts or entanglements translate into individual activity, since subjective awareness of large-scale structures can take very diverse forms.

By differentiating the various facets and phenomena of religious individualisation, and by accepting that de- or non-traditionalised behaviour can oscillate between perfection and deviance, it is possible to widen the range of descriptive terms available to us. Taking such an approach allows us to more reliably ascertain the nature and degree to which concepts and ideas (Mulsow 2017) that originated outside a particular group or cultural context had an impact on individuality in that context and on the specific manifestation of that individuality. We see this clearly in several of the chapters dealing with South Asian figures such as Kabir, Akbar, Dara Shikoh, Banarsidas, Ramakrishna, Keshab Sen, and Gandhi (Dey, Fuchs, Höke, Murphy, Parson, Sangari), and also in chapters on European Judaism (Facchini) and Pope Benedict XIII resp. Pedro Martinez de Luna (Müller-Schauenburg), or on Albert the Great (Casteigt's first contribution) and the Chinese Buddhist Monk Xuanzang (Deeg). Other issues that may also come to the fore consider cases of factual interconnections ('hybridity') that are, however, no longer perceived as phenomena of difference (for example, radical pietism that runs across religious confessions, or the fusions between Sufi, Nath Yogi, and *bhakti* ideas and practices in early modern Punjab; Murphy in this publication); finally, stereotypical defensive behaviour, such as that of religious apologetics, could actually reinforce religious interconnectedness and hybridities despite intending to prevent precisely this. Methodologically, such research should start from well-documented cases of individuals and their special forms of individualised religious practices and then move on to consider consequences, social diffusion, and the discursive evaluation of 'precarious' (Mulsow 2012) forms of religious practice and knowledge.

The sources thus reveal a broad spectrum of agents, from religiously deviant individuals in central Europe ('Beguines', 'visionaries', 'hermeticists', 'spiritualists', practitioners of 'learned magic', etc.) who were not always aware of the diverse transnational paths that their sources had taken, all the way through to religious entrepreneurs, including missionaries (such as the Jesuit missions in China, Japan, and India; since the nineteenth century also female missionaries), merchants, military personnel, and researchers across highly variegated cultures. Such people are found across periods and continents, beginning with 'Chaldeans', 'sorceresses', 'magi', ancient astrologers, entrepreneurial ascetics in India and elsewhere, prominent *bhaktas*, *gurus*, or *ācāryas*, and saint-poets, including some from disrespected groups and women but in the Indian case also many ordinary people, all the way up to Zen specialists such as E. Herrigel and D. T. Suzuki.

- b) *Structural relationships of exchange and interconnection across cultural and religious boundaries:* The very term 'Jesuits' points to the necessity of considering not only contacts through individual actors but also networks and

interconnectional regimes, as well as their evolutions. By ‘interconnectional regimes’, we understand network structures in which particular structural and habitual conditions – principles, rules, norms, and expectations on both sides – make long-term interconnections possible. Examples of interconnectional regimes include orders, missionary societies, and imperial formations (the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Mughal Empire) in which various religious strands, ethnic groups, and also particular officeholders interact. Local and cross-regional networks are linked together and solidified by such regimes; the classification of groups in legal terms provides both limits and a free space for their particular activities. Outsiders’ stereotypes of groups can be polemically rejected or, on the contrary, adopted and canonised as the groups’ own self-descriptions.

Attention should also be given to the types of interaction and their individualising effects. Processes of interconnection as well, as isolated developments, should be investigated across a geographical area ranging from Europe to South Asia, with western Asia and Islamic empires serving as a bridge in both directions. In addition to strategies of group and network formation and reciprocal differentiation, individual encounters also matter. For instance, the reactions of contemporary ‘observers’ who conceptualise these facts in their respective textual genres in their capacities as philosophers, theologians, jurists, ethnographers, hagiographers, and historians. Such processes are of particular interest for the history of individualisation, on the one hand, through their relation to traditions of self-reflection that have been present in philosophy and ethnography ever since antiquity – European as well as West, South, Southeast, and East Asian – and, on the other hand, through the individualisation, shaped by mobility, of religious experience and through the adoption of foreign traditions by individuals.

4.2 The long-term effects of processes of religious individualisation and ‘de-individualisation’: opposing forces and countertrends

As Georg Simmel emphasised many years ago, individualisation is always accompanied by processes of institutionalisation and standardisation. Individualisation was thus always complemented by the potential for de-individualisation. The most important types of ‘de-individualising’ counterforces might be said to be standardisation, normalisation, canonisation, ritualisation, the development of dogmas, and the disciplining of deviants – processes that we address as ‘conventions’, in the third Part of the publication, and ‘authorities’, in the fourth Part.

Complementary dynamics of individualisation and de-individualisation need to be further explored in order to bring to light forms and configurations of stabilising mechanisms:

- a) *The role of law*: In the late-antique Mediterranean, for example, the development of diverse forms of religious individualism (from elective-membership groups to hermits) is associated in a reciprocal process with self-reinforcing tendencies towards normalisation, whether in the criminal law of the *Codex Theodosianus* or in Talmudic texts. In more recent times such tendencies translate, for example, into regulations on individual or corporate religious freedom in constitutional law. In many cases, religious communities demanded, through their conduct and their stated commitments, appropriate behaviour from group members. In light of the significance that has been attributed, especially since the European Enlightenment, to the universality of legal rules and equality before the law as a means of individualisation (instead of de-individualising standardisation), law, and religious law in particular, as well as their corresponding law-forming institutions, appear to be particularly interesting objects of research.
- b) *Confessionalisation*: Paradoxically, the increase in the number of religious options and in the institutional protection of plural models leads both to the availability of alternatives and choices and to uniformity-imposing processes of 'confessionalisation'. In the wake of such processes, religions may enhance the criticism of individualisation to the point of fundamentalism. In addition, it must be kept in mind that an individual's decision not to exercise certain options, or an individual's making of decisions that have the effect of reducing further options, constitutes a necessary part of one's lifestyle and hence – paradoxically – also of individualisation. This form of de-individualisation is closely related to processes of religious individualisation.
- c) *Interconnections between spatially distant regions*: Here, too, the interconnectional approach broadens the spectrum of questions we can ask. Due to a strong tendency to legitimise and standardise ideas and institutions, the product of interconnections may in certain cases turn into an institutional homogeneity that intentionally conceals the underlying interconnectedness. This form of transmission of religious currents and ideas involves *longue durée* processes to such an extent that they include transcending the limits of a local community or even becoming transcultural. Given that many religious actors take care to corroborate that their actions accord with tradition, one must look into the significance of interconnection or disconnection, or, as the case may be, the significance of the supposed refusal. Such processes may be causal for the transmission of specific kinds of content, as, for example, certain Jewish elements in 'Christian' traditional concepts

(the Sabbath, 'Israel') or 'Western' elements in Orthodox churches. These macro-sociological questions seek to explore the extent to which 'nonconformity' is possible in a particular setting (including the settings of social classes) and to understand the circumstances in which religious individualisation turns into a kind of standardisation.

- d) *Religious pluralism and the rise of 'religions'*: As many of the chapters stress, individualisation always raises the question of how boundaries are demarcated. 'Religions' themselves are a central ingredient in these developments. Religions appear in this context as solidifying nexuses of religious practices and convictions – 'syncretisms' in the original sense of the term – that create community and draw outward boundaries. Religious pluralism in societies can also safeguard religious practices and convictions of minorities as stable religious options.

4.3 Conceptual development and conceptual comparisons – questioning the self

As some of the chapters in this publication demonstrate, ideas about personhood and self – explicit as well as implicit – that were developed in religious contexts are an important field of investigation and need to be more systematically explored (consider for instance Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu conceptions of 'moral' action, including *karma* theories). Non-Western ideas of self or selfhood should be subjected to a more elaborate comparison with the modern Western concepts that underlie most of our theories. What is required is a sense for the processuality and mutability of 'self'-constitution.

Efforts to bring different philosophical conceptualisations into dialogue with one another have recently been pursued with new vigour (cf. Fuchs 2015). Buddhist, Jain, Vedantist, and Western phenomenological and analytical traditions have so far been profitably brought together (see among others e.g. Siderits et al. 2011; Ganeri 2012; earlier already Hacker 1978 a and b). The primary current distinction is between positions that defend notions of a minimal self and those that plead for a narrative notion of self. In connection with the first group of positions, ongoing debates are interested in the question of whether the self is to be understood as a stream or as a structure. Among those who support narrative notions of self, a major dispute is between those who claim that the self is narratively enhanced and those who argue that the self is narratively constituted (Krueger 2011). So far, however, comparative discussions of different strands of philosophical thought have left untouched an important question: to what extent do the conceptualisations of self that emerge in a particular cultural and historical

context reflect and/or inform social ideas of the times in which they are developed and stand for societal processes of individualisation. In line with Charles Taylor's authoritative reconstruction of paths towards the modern notion(s) of self in 'the West' (Taylor 1989), we suggest further studies in order to reconstruct other histories of 'self'.

4.4 The concealed histories of dividuality

Anthropological debates about the global variability of notions of the self, the person, individual identity, and agency have inspired Part 2 of our publication, in which we focus on the debate concerning 'dividualist' modes of personhood.

The inquiries in this Part into the multiple articulations of the self or the person clearly show that an understanding of self and personhood in pre-modern as well as in modern times cannot be based solely on individuality but has to be complemented by a perspective which can also detect the dividualist dimension. We consider three lines of further research to be necessary and promising. Firstly, we propose investigating how the dividualist and the individualist aspects of the person are co-constituted and co-existing at different times and in different geographical places, and whether relationalities differ according to the spheres of life (religious, economic, social) in which they occur. In addition, it is important to ask if the relationship between the two aspects in a particular social setting is just a lived reality and tacit knowledge, or if it is also emically conceptualised and theorised. If the latter is the case, does this relationship enter these epistemologies or does it even function as a guiding social imaginary? Secondly, how far can an analysis of the individual-dividual relationship contribute to an anthropology or philosophy of life and provide new inputs for reflections on the conditionalities of life? Anthropologists and philosophers have emphasised the corporeal and social vulnerability of the human being, as well as its material dependency. Despite their singularity, an individual person is never fully in control of her/his life, never acts fully according to his/her free will, but works, rather, within the existing limits produced by the necessary entanglement of body and environment (Butler 2006, Jackson 2008, 2013), including the non-immediate or transcendental. These entanglements play out more forcefully under conditions of precarity and social suffering, and where life is considered of unequal worth (Fassin 2009, 2010, Butler 2006). Thirdly, how does the individual-dividual relationship play out in the larger narrative of the state, the nation, and the citizen? Can we dive deeper into the problem of navigating multiple personae and multiple belongings (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013), especially under political conditions of flight, migration, and displacement, often provoked by religious fundamentalisms and conflict?

4.5 Conceptual terminology in the history of religion

We close this introduction by returning one last time to terminology. As the research summarised and developed in this publication shows, the terms ‘individualisation’ and ‘religion’ contain an implicit agenda that often associates Europe with secularised modernity, and religion in Europe and elsewhere with collectivity. This agenda is often activated in the form of historical narratives, which constitute an important means for individuals and religious groups to create both inclusion and exclusion and, thus, to construct their identities (Rüpke 2018b; see, for example, Malinar and Frenkel in this publication). ‘Confessionalising processes’ – already in the period from the third to the sixth century across the entire Mediterranean region – gave rise to narratives about ‘Jews’, ‘pagans’, ‘Christians’, and ‘Manicheans’, and later about ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’. Similarly, ‘communalising processes’ in India since the 19th century have established and juxtaposed categories of ‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Sikhs’ and others as typical actors and driving forces of religious change (for confessionalising processes in antiquity: Rebillard 2012; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015a; Rebillard 2016; in later Europe: von Greyerz et al. 2003; van Lieburg 2006; for communalising processes: Pandey 1990; van der Veer 1994; Fuchs and Dalmia 2019). Admittedly, such narratives opened up a perspective on multifaceted interactions and today form a basis from which we can speak about religious plurality. At the same time, however, they also cemented (and continue to cement) group boundaries that are the objects of fierce controversy and a wide variety of forceful efforts on the part of religious organisations to impose closed group identities. Complaints about deficits in religious identity are historically widespread, in later periods even among religious groups with a closed membership. Individuality is equated with deviance. But historiography and narrative in general has also provided, since antiquity, an important opportunity for emphasising the religious individuality of the actors described or for opening up religious space for the author himself or herself (Becker and Rüpke 2018). In many chapters of this publication, narratives figure as an important tool of individualisation.

And our own narratives? During the late Enlightenment (described as ‘the saddle period’ by Reinhart Koselleck), certain key concepts in the history of ideas (‘piety’, ‘culture’, ‘future’, and even ‘religion’) underwent a change in meaning amid the social upheavals of the period. Together with changes in the historical understanding of time came a renewed historicisation of religion and a development of diverse, individualised religious cults and movements (Feil 2007). Historicisation also affected the ways of representing the intensive developments of a wide range of religious traditions during the early modern and colonial periods. Our own work is a part of this trend within the history of the related disciplines.

The use of ‘historical perspectives’, characteristic of our research, to understand the relationship between religion and the individual, is itself part of a process of historicisation of religions. The study of Christianity as a key catalyst of religious individualisation, as proposed by early scholarship, had to be transcended in order to grasp the role of other religious traditions as contexts for processes of religious individualisation. At the same time, this inquiry made the importance of religion in social processes clearly recognisable: across different historical periods and cultural regions, religion has been a privileged locus for individualising processes.

These historiographical findings confirm the paradox of religion that is at the centre of this publication: religion shows both individualising and de-individualising tendencies. At the same time, we neither see religion as the one and only seedbed of individualisation nor do we see religion as consistently discouraging or thwarting processes of individualisation. The publication demonstrates the fruitfulness of zooming in on individualisation. As proposed here, however, both the concept of religion and the concept of individualisation, particularly the latter, must be used with much more care than has previously been the case, in the form of ongoing (conceptual) reflection. The trajectory of the work initiated here suggests further avenues for research that maintains an engagement with additional terms and paradigms, in other regions and epochs. The ground gained in this publication, along with the critical reflection on religion and individualisation, needs to be expanded by the further elaboration of concepts that attend to the manifold phenomena and historical processes beyond the early modern period and Europe.

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