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Introduction

Religion is a human, historical, social and cultural phenomenon. As such, religious ideas, practices, discourses, institutions, and social expressions are in constant change. This is a product of individual performances and group processes, of changing social constellations and external pressure. It is a challenge for those engaging in religious activities as for those observing them. Change can be constituted by new agents and new events, and be regarded as contingent and narrated as such. Change can also be analyzed as a sequence of changes in time and result of time, that is to say as a 'process'. A process can be classified as continuous or as temporary (for instance differentiation or syncretism), as repeated or unique (e.g. innovation or globalization), as reversible or irreversible (e.g. expansion or commoditization). Opinions might differ. Progress has been regarded as irreversible, monotheism seen as an original phenomenon soon in decline or as an irresistible trend of the history of religion. A process looks very different if regarded as a contemporary development or as a historical and comparative phenomenon. Diagnosis of one's own time tends to stress uniqueness and the acceleration of change. Here, a comparative perspective can help to situate and recontextualize change.

For the XXI World Congress of the *International Association for the History of Religion* (IAHR) held at the University of Erfurt (Germany) in August 2015, the organizers, who acted on behalf of the hosting German association, the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft* (DVRW), chose this challenge as its central topic (see Bochinger and Rüpke 2015) and it is the topic of this book, which builds on the results of that Congress. Hence, this volume addresses the internal and external dynamics of the interaction between individuals, religious communities, and local as well as global societies. The contributions concentrate on four fields – contemporary religion in the public square, religious transformations, the individual religious actor, and challenges in narrating religion – which will be briefly introduced in the following.

1 Contemporary religion in the public square

The focus here resulted from the Congress' first field, dedicated to 'Religious communities in society: Adaptation and transformation'. Embedded within complex cultures, characterized by changing social and political parameters and intercultural exchange, religious communities constantly develop practices, dis-

courses, and institutions, conceptualized by themselves and/or by scholars as ‘religion’ or in analogous terms. Religious actors shape social, political and economic environments, they are part of those environments, even if they form minorities or are excluded from the dominant discursive patterns of ‘religion’ in their respective societies (see Bochsinger 2012). The contributions hence aim at exploring all kinds of interrelations between ‘religious communities’ and ‘society’ in both directions.

Overall, it must be kept in mind that the degree of change might vary widely. Religious traditions are invented and re-invented or they might be imperceptibly transformed, violently reformed or emphatically defended and petrified. The Congress asked: how do religious communities and institutions adapt to cultural change? How do they affect social change? Does interreligious contact and dialogue lead to religious change? How do religious communities adapt to new social and cultural environments created through global migration processes? How do they react to the possibilities and threats of new media? How does globalization transform public religions, emigration and the rise of diasporas? It is these problems that are foregrounded in the chapters dealing with ‘The Dynamics of Religions and Cultural Evolution: Worshipping Fuxi in Contemporary China’; ‘Religion and Public Space in Contemporary Japan: Re-activation of the Civilization of the Axial Age and the Manifestation of State Shinto and Buddhism’; ‘The Tactics of (In)visibility among Religious Communities in Contemporary Europe’; and ‘Religion Intersecting De-nationalization and Re-nationalization in Post-Apartheid South Africa’.

‘Religion in the public square’ has been drawing public interest far beyond academic debates and it will certainly continue to do so. Legislation and legal conflicts have proven to be a growing field of impulses for religious change, as have been attempts to use religion in groups’ strife for power. In many cases it is the physical presence of religion, in architectural form or highly visible performances, that has mobilized social identities and loud dissent and also sharpened and questioned the very nature of the ‘public’ (e.g. Vries 2006).

2 Religious transformations

Again, the chapters of this field deal with very different forms of religious transformations, thematizing ‘Forms of Religious Communities in Global Society: Tradition, Invention, and Transformation’; ‘Subversive Spirituality: Political Contributions of Ancestral Cosmologies Decolonizing Religious Beliefs’; or ‘Religion and the Historical Imagination: Esoteric Tradition as Poetic Invention’. The concept of transformations points to the very different rates and extensions of

change, and focuses on actors as well as the invisibility of change: in short, the relationship of constant and changing elements within practices, beliefs, and institutional forms. Although practices, networks, and institutions classified as religious are always subject to constant external influences and internal processes of social change, they may at the same time be viewed as *longue durée* historical structures and symbolic representations. Shaped by founding figures and their followers, often enough fostered by schisms and revivals, the dynamics of religion are to be perceived as a seemingly contradictory concomitance of continuity and fundamental changes. Such major changes have led to violent splits and feuds or the surge of new religions, and have instigated much emic reflection and legitimating discourse. This is certainly triggered by the attraction of ‘origins’ and extraordinary persons, whether regarded as religious geniuses or divine figures.

But change can also accumulate over variations on a much smaller scale. The concept of lived religion has been established over the past two decades and now extends also to historic societies (Orsi 1997; McGuire 2008; Rüpke 2016), but it does not address thriving religious communities or the latest theological fashions. Instead, without falling into the fallacy of methodological individualism – clearly untenable given the inter-subjective and relational character of the individual – it is focusing on individuals’ ‘usage’ of religion. It does not ask how individuals replicate a set of religious practices and beliefs preconfigured by an institutionalized official religion within their biography – or, conversely, opt out of adhering to a tradition. Instead, ‘lived religion’ focuses on actual everyday experience: on practices, expressions, and interactions that could be related to ‘religion’. Such ‘religion’ is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, beliefs and communications hinging on human communication with super-human or even transcendent agent(s). Ritualization and elaborate forms of representation are called upon for the success of such communication with these addressees and stimulate a selective appropriation of established forms (traditions) as well as innovation.

This is not to deny the existence and importance of culturally stabilized forms of rituals and concepts. These are of importance. It is necessary to keep in mind that individual practices are not entirely subjective. There are religious norms, there are exemplary official practices, there are control mechanisms. But we also have to take into account that our evidence is biased. It is precisely such institutions and norms that tend to predominate the evidence in many cases. We see the norm, but this is not a description, rather a communicative strategy on the part of some other agent. If we observe religion in the making, in its transformations, then institutions or beliefs are not simply culturally given, but are themselves aggregates of individual practices – as well as the latter’s constraints.

The ‘lived religion’ approach, highlighted here as an example of coming to grips with the dynamic character of religion, induces methodological modifications in the process of selecting and interpreting the evidence, to only two of which we will just very briefly refer. Firstly, the focus is on experience rather than symbols. The concept of experience has not yet been brought to bear on many non-contemporary phenomena outside of mysticism. Frequently, the very subjective nature of ‘experience’ seems to be in conflict with the dearth of sources. ‘Experience’ stresses the role of the viewer and user of objects, texts or more or less sacralized spaces in open and domestic contexts, and the communicative and social processes of articulating and classifying such experience as religious, giving as much prominence to the individual as to the social context (Taves 2016).

A second focus is on culture in interaction rather than on habitus, organization or culture as text. Everyday religion is not to be grasped in terms of individual isolation, but is characterized by diverse social contexts that are appropriated, reproduced and informed by the agent on relevant occasions (Lichterman 2012). People are not a group and behave accordingly. Instead, by trying to embody imagined norms they form a group in a specific public, according to the situational necessities of forming alliances, displaying differences, giving saliency to particular (religious) collective identities. Both notions thus focus on the dynamics of religion, from situational alterations to long-term consequences in larger aggregates.

3 Focusing on the individual

Individuals, hence, are agents of change. Within modernization theory, individualization has advanced to being a hallmark of (Western) modernity – sometimes mirrored in counter-stereotypes by non-Western thinkers. Many forms of individual religiosity, or even less institution-related spirituality, have been convincingly diagnosed, and consequently have severely modified our concept of religion. But it has also become clear that such phenomena might be critically reviewed outside that ‘Western world’ which would like to stand out compared to others just by the self-description as the locus of a ‘modern age’. This is taking the form of pointing to the historical nonsense of such claims to singularity, as well as criticizing those counter-stereotypes that e.g. elevate Eastern collectivity over supposed Western individuality. The conceptual linking of modern age and religious individuality has obstructed looking at comparable phenomena in earlier periods, so that the focus on individuality has played only a limited role in the examination of the dynamics of religion in history (Fuchs 2015). We give just

two examples. In regarding ‘Western’ pre-modern cultures, the concept of polis religion or civic religion – that is the identity of the religious practices of a political unit and their institutions – functions with respect to the whole of religion. Likewise the concept of the religious unity of medieval Europe is just the reverse of the self-description of modern societies implied in the secularization thesis. The diagnosis of modern privatization and individualization and the ascription of a public and collective character to pre-modern religion reinforce each other.

Such observations and criticism cannot overlook the fact that religious individuality is distributed unevenly also in situations characterized by processes of individualization based on or transforming religion. It has been pointed out that after the existence of awesome dissenters in the high middle ages, it was the large number of people interested not only in objective processes of technical and economic matters, but also in the subjective dimension of the human agents that constituted individualization as a process. But mere numbers do not add up to a scale. In several cultural contexts ‘individuality’ is not an arbitrary option within the range of possible privatized sacred cosmoi, but it carries a hegemonic character (e.g. Madsen 2009). It is a way of life that is equipped with a claim to dominance in the eyes of a larger group. In certain phases, some religious traditions developed anthropological and theological reflections that could further individuality. The institutionalization of such tendencies, however, was a matter of historical contexts and social location; it was contingent. For India, for instance, the tradition of bhakti offers a comparable constellation. The narrative and theological framework of the propagation of an individual and even loving relationship of the human and a god – Vishnu and Shiva being particularly popular, wherever the addressee was regarded as personalized (instead of abstract, *nirguna*) – proved to be a reservoir that led and leads to processes of individualization of very different forms with regard to gender, medial presence, and social mobilization (e.g. Craddock 2007; Omvedt 2008).

Contrary to the dominant view of individualization as a uni-linear and coherent process, the History of Religion perspective reveals diverse, temporary, and discontinuous processes. The claim of uniqueness, unity, and irreversibility of individualization is in itself a claim that is part and parcel of modernization theory. This is reflected in this field’s chapters on topics like ‘Religion and Life Trajectories: Islamists Against Self and Other’; ‘Angels, Animals and Religious Change in Antiquity and Today’; ‘Gaining Access to the Radically Unfamiliar: Religion in Modern Times’ and finally on “Cloning Minds”: Religion between Individuals and Collectives’.

4 Narrating religion

The use of the term ‘religion’ by an academic discipline needs self-reflection. Religious change is registered and narrated by outsiders and insiders. Through its chronological framework, history allows for various stories to relate and speak to one another. It is likely that conflicts and contesting claims have frequently served as triggers for the production of alternate narratives. History, then, does not occur in the singular. Instead it tends to be disputed and endangered. History introduces contingency from the very beginning in order to question the established truths of others.

Religion may not seem a very likely candidate for historicization, featuring as it does meta-historical claims, gods outside of time, and displaying an inherent immunity to change. Religion as a social phenomenon possesses strong traditional authority in a Weberian sense. Frequently, myths tell stories of a distant past and thereby establish binding norms. These norms continue to be valid, not *despite* the fact that this past is categorically different from contemporary life, but precisely *for* this reason. How could one narrate a history for a system of rituals, for a ‘cold’, a supposedly rather stable sector of culture? How could continuity and change be accounted for in a narrative (Stausberg 2001)?

Emic representations influence academic interpretations (Otto, Rau, Rüpke 2015). Like the conference, this volume takes an intensive look at the narratives of and about ‘religions’, their histories and the contexts of their origins and traditions. Scholarly paradigms and theories are therefore as dynamic as their objects and invite us to regard old and new questions. Foremost among these seems to be to rethink those master narratives about religious change which have had a large impact on the general public and politics. The last section of the volume analyzes examples from very different geographical and historical contexts by focusing on ‘Of Yellow Teaching and Black Faith: Entangled Knowledge Cultures and the Creation of Religious Traditions’; ‘Global Intellectual History and the Dynamics of Religion’; and ‘Narrating, Performing and Feeling a “Religion”: On Representations of Judaism’.

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