



Linköping University

RESEARCH CONFERENCES

ESF-LiU Conference

Historiography of Religion

Norrköping • Sweden
10-14 September 2012

Chair: **Jörg Rüpk**e, Max-Weber-Centre, University of Erfurt, DE
Co-Chaired by: **Susanne Rau**, Department of History, University of Erfurt, DE

www.esf.org/conferences/12386



Conference Highlights

Please provide a brief summary of the conference and its highlights in non-specialist terms (especially for highly technical subjects) for communication and publicity purposes. (ca. 400-500 words)

[548w] The conference focused on the question ‘**How, under which conditions and with which consequences are religions historicized?**’. It aimed at furthering the study of religion as of historiography by analysing how religious groups (or their adversaries) employ historical narratives in the construction of their identities. Likewise it asked how such groups were invented by later historiography and are continued in modern research. Thus it also focused on the biases and elisions of current analytical and descriptive frames. Combining disciplinary competences of Religious Studies and History of Religion, Confessional Theologies, History, History of Science, and Literary Studies, the participants initiated a *comparative historiography of religion*. Furthermore, a *history of historical research on religion* was stimulated by identifying key steps in the early modern and modern history of research. The agenda of the conference was therefore highly comparative and interdisciplinary.

Numerous scholars from different fields of historical and religious research, from Circum-Mediterranean and European as well as Asian religious traditions from the first millennium BCE to the present came together. The conference was structured by a series of six sessions in three days (including one poster session) which combined impulses from short (10 minutes) and long (20 minutes) lectures with plenary discussions. Here, the impulse of the initial question was driven forward by further questions developed in the opening lecture by the organizers like “Which contexts do provoke processes of historicization and the development of historiography in particular?”; “Which practices to historicize the past, i.e. to acknowledge and sequence the pastness of the past, have been used in historicizing religions?”; “How do religions make themselves immune against historicist claims?”

The conference programme included some 26 papers focusing on the above-mentioned questions and covered a variety of topics and religious traditions. A first group of papers dealt with narrations of ‘origins and developments’. In this group, among others, specialists on the ancient Mediterranean (Ingvild Gilhus), on Hinduism (Johannes Bronkhorst), Islam (Chase Robinson), Buddhism (Sylvie Hureau; Per Sørensen), the European middle ages (Pekka Tolonen), and Early modern Europe (Yves Krumenacker) presented lectures on their topics. A second group dealt with the topic of ‘writing histories’ and included papers on Islam (Ulrika Mårtensson, Shahzad Bashir), Hinduism (Jon Keune), Early modern and modern Europe (Susanne Rau; Hannah Schneider; Franziska Metzger), and modern China (Philipp Hetmanczyk). Finally, a third group focussed on the interconnectedness between pre-academic and academic discourses dealing with the historiography of religion: ‘Transforming narratives: scholars, methods, disciplines’. In this group, papers on Judaism and Jewish Studies (Reinhard G. Kratz, Christiana Facchini), on modern interpretations of ancient polytheism (Renée Koch-Pietre, Gabriella Gustafsson), and on the modern History of Christianity in Italy (Giovanni Filoramo) were presented. A poster session offered the opportunity to present case studies as contributions to the other sessions. It was used by nearly twenty young scholars.

I hereby authorize ESF – and the conference partners to use the information contained in the above section on ‘Conference Highlights’ in their communication on the scheme.

Scientific Report

Executive Summary

(2 pages max)

The conference focussed on the question 'How, under which conditions and with which consequences are religions historicized?' It aimed at furthering the study of religion as of historiography by analyzing how religious groups (or their adversaries) employ historical narratives for specific purposes as well as in the construction of their identities or how such groups are invented by later historiography (comparative historiography). Thus it also focused on the biases and elisions of current analytical and descriptive frames (history of research). It brought together disciplinary competences of Religious Studies and History of Religion, Confessional Theologies, History, History of Science, and Literary Studies, thus combining specialist for central, south and east Asia with experts on Mediterranean, European and West Asian religion and historiography. The range of epochs dealt with started from the 1st millennium BCE and reached into the 21st century and included discussion of large scale developments as indicated by evolutionary concepts or concepts of "axiality" as well as micro-historical approaches, centering on the plurality and diversity of competing contemporary historiographies.

The conference programme included some 26 papers focussing on different aspects of the above-mentioned question (among others: "Which contexts do provoke processes of historicization and the development of historiography in particular?"; "Which practices to historicize the past, i.e. to acknowledge and sequence the pastness of the past, have been used in historicizing religions?"; "How do religions make themselves immune against historicist claims?") and covered a variety of topics and religious traditions. A first group of papers dealt with narrations of 'origins and developments'. In this group, among others, specialists on the ancient Mediterranean (Ingvild Gilhus), on Hinduism (Johannes Bronkhorst), Islam (Chase Robinson), Buddhism (Sylvie Hureau; Per Sørensen), the European middle ages (Pekka Tolonen), and Early modern Europe (Yves Krumenacker) presented lectures on their topics. A second group dealt with the topic of 'writing histories' and included papers on Islam (Ulrika Mårtensson, Shahzad Bashir), Hinduism (Jon Keune), Early modern and modern Europe (Susanne Rau; Hannah Schneider; Franziska Metzger), and modern China (Philipp Hetmanczyk). Finally, a third group focussed on the interconnectedness between pre-academic and academic discourses dealing with the historiography of religion: 'Transforming narratives: scholars, methods, disciplines'. In this group, papers on Judaism and Jewish Studies (Reinhard G. Kratz, Christiana Facchini), on modern interpretations of ancient polytheism (Renée Koch-Piettre, Gabriella Gustafsson), and on the modern History of Christianity in Italy (Giovanni Filoramo) were presented.

In order to address the above-mentioned issues, the organizers of the conference invited numerous scholars from different fields of historical and religious research, from Circum-Mediterranean and European as well as Asian religious traditions from the first millennium BCE to the present. The conference was structured by a series of six sessions in three days (including one poster session) which combined impulses from short (10 minutes) and long (20 minutes) talks with plenary discussions. The poster sessions offered the opportunity to present case studies as contributions to the other sessions and was used by nearly twenty younger scholars.

Alongside the paper and poster sessions, a significant amount of time was reserved for discussion, partly after the talks and panels, partly during the common lunch and dinner meetings and the final discussion at the end of the conference.

The participants initiated a *comparative historiography of religion* by applying literary comparison

and historical contextualization to those texts that have been used as central documents for histories of individual religions and by analyzing their historiographic character, tools and strategies. Finally, *the history of historical research on religion* was stimulated by identifying key steps in the early modern and modern history of research. The agenda of the conference was therefore highly comparative and interdisciplinary, with an intercultural and diachronic focus on “Historiography of Religion: New approaches to origins of narrating a religious past”.

Scientific Content of the Conference

(1 page min.)

- Summary of the conference sessions focusing on the scientific highlights
- Assessment of the results and their potential impact on future research or applications

The questions addressed in the sessions (partly fully coinciding) contributed to three basic axes of research.

1 Origins and developments

Johannes Bronkhorst (Lausanne) dealt with ancient Indian Brahmanism and focused on the Indian pattern of de-historicization present in the doctrine of ‘yugas’ (world ages). Bronkhorst presented an exception to this pattern in a text called ‘Kali purana’ which significantly curtailed the (typically very large) timeframe of the ‘Kali yuga’ and proposed the hypothesis that the authors felt in fact living close to the end of the world. Systematically the talk and its discussion led to the question whether the failing of prophecy might be an important instigations for historiography by religious agents.

Ingvild Gilhus (Bergen) introduced the concept of living literature and analyzed the collection of texts in the codex Nag Hammadi II. The phenomenon of an additional temporal framing before biblical origins and in the very end points to an elite establishing its status by specialist knowledge. Within this frame, interest is in permanency, not change; the intensive historicisation of heresiographic literature in the form of genealogies is countered by a lack of names and events.

Chase Robinson (New York) started from the notion of history as a repository of knowledge claims based on plausibility, a criterion that has to be historicized itself. Initial Islamic historiography, starting in the second Islamic century, legitimated the Quran by connecting it with the man Muhammad as the prophet, sketched in the genre of biography. The prophet is the locus of historicisation, for instance in construing a “*translatio imperii*” to the Muslim community. In comparison, non-prophetic biographies are formulaic and serial.

Sylvie Hureau presented her work on medieval Chinese Buddhist hagiographies and proposed a two-fold hypothesis: (1) that the miraculous events in these biographies are not arbitrary but illustrate typical patterns of Indian Buddhist sutras known to the readers at that time; (2) that these texts adapted Indian narrative patterns to a Chinese context.

Per Sørensen (Leipzig) gave a survey on medieval Tibetan historiography, separating five typical historiographic genres: annals, genealogy, register of sources, ‘origins of the dharma’, and apocryphal ‘treasure literature’. While discussing the different institutional and functional contexts of these genres, Sørensen stressed their relative homogeneity and the quick dissolution of their boundaries. Thus, it proved to be more fruitful to analytically distinguished ‘inner’, ‘outer’ and ‘secret’ as narrative patterns in these sources.

Pekka Tolonen ((Turku) traced back the textual sources on the origins of the medieval European Waldensian movement and presented six texts from 1174 to the 1360s that adopted very different narrative and ideological patterns while dealing with the movement. In their quest for origins, Protestant historiography later based its judgment of the Waldensian movement and Peter Waldes on the two motifs of sanctity of the founder and apostolic origins in these early accounts.

Yves Krumenacker (Lyon) analyzed French Protestant historiography of the 17th century as a sort of texts answering the question “Where was your church before Luther’s and Calvin’s reformation?”

The heuristic apparatus developed included dogmatic inventions or critique before 1500, individuals who spread new ideas, and the continuity of groups from Apostolic times onwards. The contribution demonstrated the role of narratives of martyrdom for the historiography of groups that remained defeated minorities in their struggle with French Catholicism and the importance of historiography for a specific Protestant identity.

2 Writing histories

Ulrika Mårtensson (Trondheim) presented a paper on the medieval Arab historian at-Tabari. She discussed his interpretation of the appearance of the Qur'an as a godly reaction to a former breach of contract and advocated a more elaborate scholarly reception of at-Tabari in order to understand early Islam. For the general question of religion being confronted with history, her demonstration showed important differences in the treatment of the Quran by one and the same author, but in the different genres of history and Quranic commentary.

Shahzad Bashir (Stanford) focused on the Early Modern Persian historian Muhammad Khwandamir and his massive work *Habib as-siyar*. He described the different layers and historiographical subjects of the text and particularly focussed on the different representation of Islamic, Persian, and Mongol history. From an analytical point of view it was interesting to see how sensitive the chronicler is of how to produce meaning.

Jon Keune (Göttingen) presented his work on the West Indian Hindu movement of 'Varkari sampraday' and discussed aspects of its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. He stressed the problem of writing a history of this movement as the sources – written by practitioners, opponents, and others – tend to instrumentalize this development within different cultural and narrative (i.e. polemical) patterns.

Even more attention to the practitioners of historiography was given by Susanne Rau (Erfurt). Historiography is a tool for creating purpose and identity, but religion is always involved in many purposes, from embedding local history into the history of salvation to offering actual and virtual experiences within the framework of education of a prince. Additionally, the narratives are usually written by individuals (not groups), hardly full-time academics before 1650, frequently priests or preachers.

In the context of historiography in the confessional age Hannah Schneider (Paris) narrowed the focus down to outright polemics in the 19th century. She identified important topoi in the narrative proper – e.g. the topos of talking about the government of the churches offered space for advancing or criticizing the infallibility of the pope – or in paratext like mottos on title pages – “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.

Against this background Franziska Metzger (Fribourg) developed a tool-box for analyzing an entangled history of religion, history, and the nation. She pointed out that attention must be paid to the amalgamation of different discursive fields (dealing with region or religion for instance), to processes of sacralisation in certain discourses (even of science), and of different communicative communities: of memory, of knowledge, of generations. Paying attention to meta-narratives and discourses about methodology helps to achieve this aim, for example to explain the dominance of the religious factor in national-liberal and catholic narratives in the 19th century.

Making fruit of the comparative approach of the conference, Philipp Hetmanczyk (Zürich) pointed to similar entanglements in the early 20th century's engagement with the factor of religion in accounts of the economic development of China. Here, Confucian ancestor worship could be seen as mirroring feudal structures or hindering the accumulation of capital, even if Confucianism could be seen as inspiring a productive economic ethos in other accounts.

3 Transforming narratives: scholars, methods, disciplines

In the last section, dedicated to the establishment of modern disciplines, Cristiana Facchini (Bologna) analyzed the history of the historicization of Judaism from the 17th century onwards, programmatically going beyond the usual starting point of the 19th century when dealing with historic disciplines. In following the reception of the seemingly antiquarian account of Jewish ritual by Leon of Modena (publ. 1637/38) the influence of far-ranging historical comparisons, the influence of small networks, and the failure of political projects and its fatal consequences became apparent.

Renée Koch-Piettre (Paris) discussed the 18th century European scholar Charles de Brosses, particularly focussing on his work *Du culte des dieux fétiches*. She stressed Charles de Brosses' innovative approach in interpreting ancient polytheism by describing his usage of the concept of 'fétichisme' that has been adopted by various later scholars.

Gabriella Gustafsson (Uppsala) exemplified mechanism of ancient as well as modern historiographical distortions by showing the gradual transformation of verbal ideographic accounts in early narratives (e.g. *evocare*, 'they called out the god') into abstract and generalizing nouns (*evocatio*, 'the calling out of gods'), suggestive of established and formalized rituals.

Reinhard G. Kratz (Göttingen) added an important facet to the conference's results by discussing the reconcilability of historical method and belief. He followed the tenet of scholarship destructing the *historia sacra* and this being an attack on religion from Julius Wellhausen onwards and analyzed its historiographical roots. On this basis he developed a hermeneutical approach that asks to a) realize how irrational elements of 'sacred history' are articulated in religious traditions, starting from textual conjectures in the biblical tradition, and b) to historicise 'modern' scholarship itself. Here, he converged with many other contributions who had shown the high methodological standards of supposedly 'pre-critical' scholarship.

Giovanni Filoramo (Torino), finally, contributed a paper that contextualised the establishment of chairs of "History of Christianity" as a replacement for the discipline of "Church History" in Italian Universities from the late 19th century onwards within the discussion of the substantial or merely accidental character of historical change in matters religious.

Forward Look

(1 page min.)

- *Assessment of the results*
- *Contribution to the future direction of the field – identification of issues in the 5-10 years & timeframe*
- *Identification of emerging topics*

The results of research presented in talks and posters demonstrated that the research question informing the conference is highly productive. New interpretations and perspectives were generated for many texts or textual traditions. The seemingly anachronistic and Eurocentric application of the term 'historiography' to widely different religions and texts in past and contemporary societies proved hermeneutically successful in introducing new perspectives into pre-modern and non-Western traditions as well as breaking down notions of 'pragmatic historiography' or 'modern scholarship'. Thus, the participants initiated a comparative historiography of religion by applying literary comparison and historical contextualization to those texts that have been used as central documents for histories of individual religions and by analyzing their historiographic character, tools and strategies. The questions addressing the tensions between orientation by a history and critical plurality of historiographic voices as well as the tensions between continuities of historiographic techniques and claims to qualitatively different scholarship proved irresolvable, and hence fruitful, as these tensions are informed by and indicate larger issues of human culture and its observation, permanency and change.

'Historiography of Religion: New Approaches to origins of narrating a religious past' has proven

crucial in establishing a new field of research that forces scholarship to integrate historiographic reflections of the participating disciplines with a fresh look onto the classical textual “sources” of any historical reconstruction of religious practices and ideas. Three issues will be of special relevance in the near future. a) A history of historical research on religion was stimulated by identifying key steps in the early modern and modern history of research. For disciplines adherent to the paradigm of “History of Religion” historiography will move from a special field on the margins of the relevant discipline to the center of methodological reflection with the next decade. b) At the same time it will contribute to an already visible shift in other fields, that is, the reinvigoration of comparative approaches, including the more complex notions of transfer and entanglement. On the basis of the permanent recreation of group boundaries in historiographic accounts, the concept of individual “religions” will be seriously questioned as ordering principle of research. Here, the entanglement of religion, region, language, and historiography has to be critically re-evaluated as is the case in national history or national literature. Finally, c) focusing on the practices of historiography enables a more complex analysis of the interplay of collective meta-narratives and shared ethos with individual agenda and appropriations. Here, religious studies will have to approach relevant sciences as well as tap hermeneutical techniques as developed by anthropological, literary and media studies.

Within the discussions and the forward look section of the conference, several topics have emerged which merit further research:

- the identification of constellations that stimulate responses in the form of historiography
- the identification of constellations provoking strategies of de-historicisation and their forms
- the role of the historiography of the period of interconfessional strife and imperial expansion for the shape of modern European historiography of religion in comparison to non-European paths of historiographic writing
- the role of scale (cosmological, universal, epoch centered, biographically focused) in historicizing religion
- the establishment and breakdown of generic boundaries in historicising religion

Mapping such problems on the historiographic tradition of European and extra-European religion would need to continue and broaden the incipient network of interested researchers. Within the existing programs, COST might offer a framework to pursue such a task. On such a basis further steps e.g. within the range of Marie Curie actions will be considered.

- Is there a need for a foresight-type initiative?

No.

Atmosphere and Infrastructure

▪ *The reaction of the participants to the location and the organization, including networking, and any other relevant comments*

The participants were very satisfied with the organization, which was run as efficient as friendly. They were also satisfied with the location. The location was functional, the lecture theatre a bit oversized for the actual number of participants. The setting within the centre of Norrköping was admired and much above expectations. The late shift of the venue had been irritating in this respect.

The early timing of the poster session enabled in particular young researcher to get into touch with co-equal as well as senior scholars at an early moment. The atmosphere of discussion was very open and highly productive; time and again the discussion might have be continued despite the fact that presenters were very disciplined in their use of speaking time.

Sensitive and Confidential Information

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Confidential Issues

▪ *Any other issues, not to be included in the published report.*

A number of participants, mostly from India, did not show up despite being allocated substantial financial support. ESF should find ways to enlarge commitment even of grantees by demanding a guarantee sum which might be reimbursed in the form of a accommodation voucher or in travel grants.

Date & Author:

September 27th, Jörg Rüpke