

The Making of Religion? Re-Describing Religious change in Pre-Modern Europe

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In the past years, the traditional narratives of secularization and linear growth of modernity in the West have undergone intense and possibly transformational critique: Most importantly, perspectives of global history have undermined the old narrative of the 'Rise of the West'. But also, its companion narrative of the 'Rise of the Secular', particularly important for Europe¹, is being reworked. Studies on the role of religion in pre-modern and modern cultures have either postulated a 'resurgence' of religion and 'return of the Gods' or emphatically confirmed the rise of a 'secular age'.²

Pre-modern Europe plays a large part in this debate – it is, first and foremost, still construed as the monolithic backdrop of religiousness against which post-Enlightenment developments can be contrasted. But studies focusing on the role of religion in pre-modern Europe have only recently begun to enter this debate. As a field of research, contemporary religion is usually still treated quite separately from the religious cultures of past ages, and the story of how to get from 'medieval' to 'modern' religion remains shaped by narratives of secularisation which frequently go right back to the European Reformation or the Enlightenment.

Focusing on the role of historiographical narratives and methodical approaches to pre-modern religion, the small workshop at Harvard University's Mahindra Humanities Center questioned this divide and outlined the potential and possibilities inherent in re-describing religious change beyond the traditional narratives. Funded by the German Volkswagen Foundation and explicitly designed to start an international conversation, the workshop invited twelve American, British and German experts on Medieval and Early modern history and literature to enter

the debate. Two themes formed the framework for the two workshop days Friday and Saturday, April 29-30, 2011: Attempts to historicize and chart the changeable nature of 'religion' in the pre-modern European centuries, and debates on the frameworks and narratives used to describe it.

In her introduction, organizer SITA STECKEL (Harvard/Münster) emphasized the different narratives structuring US-American, British and German research on religion and their role in the formation of current configurations of 'religion' and the 'secular'. She questioned the linear narrative of a 'Making of (modern) religion' in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period, the heritage left by 20th century scholarship firmly placing the origins of Western modernity in the European Middle Ages. In its place, she called for a framework based on the assumption of an ongoing and continual process of 'Religion in the Making', spanning the Pre-Modern and Modern periods. Such a re-description would not only call for new approaches, but for new ways of generating meaning in historically oriented research, e.g. via metaphor. Instead of linear developments we might, for example, study divergences or 'cycles of de-sacralization and re-sacralization' – a term used by British historian Alexandra Walsham, which continued to be a subject of debate. New metaphors, however, would also demand new ways of describing 'religion' and its various aggregates itself.

In her masterful keynote lecture, Early Modern historian ALEXANDRA WALSHAM (Cambridge, UK) then summarized the problems inherent in categories linked to grand linear narratives, such as 'Christianization', 'Reformation', 'Disenchantment of the World' and the emergence of 'pluralism'. Her trenchant analysis of these terms, which have all been dated to more than one period in European history to the chagrin of current schol-

¹ See the controversial Jose Casanova, *Europas Angst vor der Religion*, Berlin 2009.

² See e.g. Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent religion and world politics*, Grand Rapids, MI 1999; Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur*, München 2004; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA, London 2007.

ars, illuminated typical problems. As became clear, a careful de-construction of traditional narratives can do much to clarify the usual problems – teleologies, denominational sentiment (or pointed criticism of it), and clashes between historical and sociological perspectives. Walsham pointed out the possibilities inherent in experimenting with metaphors such as ‘cyclical’ developments, but argued that no ready-made solution or metaphor exists to solve theoretical problems and generate new approaches.

In the opening session of Saturday, April 30, 2011, both papers focused on the way modern scholars and medieval/early modern contemporaries constructed religion itself. CHRISTINE CALDWELL AMES’s (Columbia, South Carolina) presentation opened up the broad possible spectrum of aspects of ‘religion’ in the Middle Ages. Combining approaches derived from Religious Studies with the specific field of the Medieval inquisition, she drew attention to the fact that both Medieval inquisitors and Early Modern and Modern scholars fitted pre-modern beliefs and practices into taxonomies, but mainly constructed their own idealized views of religion in this. AN-TJE FLÜCHTER’s (Heidelberg) presentation firstly analyzed the relevance of religion in early modern European perceptions of Indian rulership. She reasoned that premodern Europeans could distinguish between religion and politics, if they wanted to. Secondly, she tackled the making of Indian religions in the German discourse, underlining that there was not one perception of religion in India but several. Following how religion was used as a marker for alterity, she traced that in the 17th century, Indian religions were irrational because they were not Christian, in the 18th because they were not enlightened and in the 19th because they were Orientals.

The next session challenged concepts of large-scale change usually explained as ‘Reformation’ or ‘Renaissance’: NICHOLAS WATSON’s (Harvard) presentation on ‘Renaissances and their dark ages’ not only questioned the validity of a concept of ‘twelfth-century Renaissance/Reformation’, but drew attention to various hitherto neglected patterns of continuity and change in English vernacular literature. As he argued, tradi-

tions of vernacular pastoral care were not so much begun as interrupted by the twelfth-century’s turn towards monastic elites, after which the Fourth Lateran Council in turn stopped this ‘de-secularization’ by renewed interest in pastoral care. Highlighting similarly neglected topics and groups, ANDREAS PIETSCH (Münster) drew attention to radical groups on the fringe of the Reformation. Drawing attention to a discourse of religious ambiguity and indifference developing in reaction to the sixteenth century’s bitter quarrels about the role of rites and practices in religious belonging, and making a specific case for the Netherlands, Pietsch argued that there may have been large disaffected percentages of the population which could be mobilized and de-mobilized in cycles reaching up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The third session continued to de-bunk traditional narratives, now focusing on the boundary of religion and secular sciences in the Middle Ages. FRANK REXROTH’s (Göttingen) presentation on the ‘Two Master Narratives of Scholasticism’ offered an analysis of the increasingly more differentiated narratives of religious change within modern research on Medieval scholastic culture. Both ‘enlightened’ and ‘romantic’ narratives of medieval learning were reworked intensively in increasingly complex social milieu of the 19th and early 20th century. As all participants of debates wanted to claim versions of rationality, internal re-duplications of the enlightened-romanticized opposition produced the variants of the grand themes that we are still dealing with today. While also treating the boundary of ‘secular/religious’ in Medieval learning, JULIE ORLEMANSKI’s (Harvard) analysis of medical literature in Late Medieval England asked some pointed questions about the metaphors we may want to use beyond traditional classifications. As linear developments and ‘rationalizations’ are clearly absent in her sources, Orlemanski emphasized that looking for ‘amalgams of religious and secular’ and concepts of ‘stasis’ or ‘small-scale meaning-making’ might enrich the debate – both as an interesting challenge and an underresearched complement to frameworks for religious change.

The last session returned to concepts of

'religion' and the way in which they can be mapped in pre-modern sources. MATT GABRIELE's (Virginia Tech) presentation dissected the modern historiography of Medieval 'millennial fear' around the year 1000, and replaced it with a new analysis of the sources. Deconstructing the historiography of the 'terrors of the year 1000', Gabriele showed both a legacy of enlightenment and of romanticized thought, which usually remained confined to debates of the 'rationality' of medieval contemporaries. Focusing on early and high medieval biblical exegesis on the 'end of days', he then proposed a more nuanced approach postulating a sporadic, but ongoing – and sometimes almost 'cyclical' – reworking of concern with history and the apocalypse which also prompted re-negotiations of religious/secular history. SITA STECKEL's (Harvard/Münster) presentation focused on the exemplary case of the heretical visionary Na Prous Boneta of Languedoc, probably burned in 1328. As Steckel argued, the extant research narratives fail to grasp the facets of this medieval figure, as she represents a development exemplifying both the Medieval 'rise of the (secular) rational' and its own opposite, a 'religious movement'. As the interrelation and intersection of these two narratives in the early fourteenth-century Beguin movement in Languedoc suggests, conflicts may have served as catalysts for re-negotiations of order and authority which tie opposing legal and religious trends together.

In the concluding commentaries, it seemed that the starting hypothesis found a broad consensus: The current reworking of traditional linear narratives of religious change also calls for new thoughts about directionalities and metaphors of religious change in the study of the pre-modern period. The participants' interest in re-mapping pre-modern 'religion' itself in the sources, framing them in new (or established) metaphors and finally reworking older grand narratives altogether seems very promising.

As in the previous discussions, however, the metaphor of 'cyclical' change was much debated. While it seemed to lend itself well to some recurring developments, commentator BJÖRN WEILER (Aberystwyth/Freiburg) emphasized that other metaphors and pat-

terns should be followed up; an alternative structural metaphor suggested several times in the course of the workshop was that of 'movements and counter-movements' of religious change and resulting conflict-driven divergences. Weiler also called for a systematizing approach taking stock of the methodical problems inherent in various typical patterns. Taking up the problematic definition of 'religion' that had been discussed in the first session by Ames, KARL UBL (Tübingen/Princeton) emphasized the problem of proving/discounting genuine belief for further work on concepts of religion, citing both medieval discourses of hypocrisy and modern tendencies to suspect material interests behind religious arguments. Finally, KATHLEEN DAVIS (Rhode Island/Princeton) cautioned against unreflected uses of juxtapositions of 'medieval' and 'religious' culture. She reminded participants that the distinction of 'religious' and 'secular' is never only a descriptive, but mostly a political one, linking the past to current political issues, however much these may vary in Europe and the US. Tying in with Walsham's opening reflections on identity-driven views of religious change, Davis underlined that categorical distinctions of 'medieval' and 'modern', 'religion' and 'secularity' remain tied to identity-building also embedded in academic agendas.

The question what older narratives could be replaced with remained interestingly wide open in the workshop. Several participants suggested that a continuation of the debate should ask what narratives of the regional spread and interrelation of religious cultures, necessarily somewhat underrepresented, could contribute. This seemed to be one of the most promising aspects of the workshop: Historical explanations questioning the old 'Rise of the West' narrative by focusing cultural contact and transfer not only share theoretical concerns, but also offer alternative narratives. They may well be the best bet to provide narratives for new global histories of religion – but a lot of work remains to be done until this can be done on a methodologically sound historical basis. It remains to be hoped that historians of pre-modern Christian Europe and of its various cultural and religious 'others' will team up and avoid a rift

between developing research fields that could profit enormously from better knowledge of each other's agendas and results.

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Conference overview:

Sita Steckel (Harvard University/ Münster): From 'Making of Religion' to 'Religion in the Making'

Keynote lecture

Alexandra Walsham (Cambridge, UK): Migrations of the Holy. Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Christine Caldwell Ames (University of South Carolina): Inquisitors and Historians: Scholarly Constructions of 'Religion' in the Middle Ages

Antje Flüchter (Heidelberg): Indian Mysteries. Terms, Concepts and Perceptions of Religions in India in Early Modern European Texts

Nicholas Watson (Harvard University): Renaissances and Their Dark Ages: The Case of the 'Long' Twelfth Century

Andreas Pietsch (Münster): Radical Reformation Revisited: Re-Describing the Family of Love

Frank Rexroth (Göttingen): Religion and the two Master Narratives of Scholasticism

Julie Orlemanski (Harvard University): Medicine, Religion, and Causality in Late-Medieval England

Matthew Gabriele (Virginia Tech): Reorienting the Medieval West around the Millennium: Thinking from Past to Future

Sita Steckel (Harvard University/Münster): Talking circles (cycles?) around Na Prou Boneta

Comment Panel

Kathleen Davis (University of Rhode Island/Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton), Karl Ubl (Tübingen/ IAS, Princeton), Björn K. Weiler (Aberystwyth/FRIAS Freiburg)

Tagungsbericht *The Making of Religion? Re-Describing Religious change in Pre-Modern Eu-*