

Gall, Lothar; Willoweit, Dietmar (Hrsg.): *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Course of History. Exchange and Conflicts*. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag 2011. ISBN: 978-3-486-59707-3; 469 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Thomas Philipp, Institut für Politische Wissenschaft, Universität Erlangen

This volume emanated from a conference with the same title in March 2009, organized by the Historisches Kolleg in Munich and was edited by Lothar Gall, a renowned historian of German history, and Dietmar Willoweit, a specialist for the history of medieval law, civil law and church law in Germany. There are 24 essays organized thematically in 8 sections, varying in length between 7 to 35 pages. In spite of the English title, 17 articles are in German.

A good quarter of the authors are Jewish, almost three quarters Christians and only one, Yavuz Köse seems to be Muslim who, of all people, writes about a topic not at all belonging to the theme of the conference: „The reception of Socialism and Communism in the late Ottoman period“. Thus this collection reflects quite precisely the academic landscape in Germany discussing religion: Protestant professors teach Protestant, Catholic professors teach Catholic theology; Judaic studies are taught by Christians as well as Jews, while the well developed field of Islamic studies (Islamwissenschaften) is almost completely the domain of Christian Germans until today. For a conference such as this one, aiming at analyzing conflicts and mutual (mis)understandings, it is difficult to believe that not a single Muslim specialist of Islam could be found to participate. But it has a long academic tradition.

As so often is the case, there are some outstanding essays, some not so good ones and some that thematically barely belong. With 24 articles, spread over a wide thematic spectrum, only a few can be dealt with here in any depth. The anchor for the whole conference and the book could have been the very long essay by Reinhard Schulze, for it could have provided a framework and a central theme. Schulze starts with the assumption of a process of convergence of the three

monotheisms, „which results from conditions and contexts becoming increasingly similar“ (p. 139). Generally speaking, Schulze means by this „modernity“. The Protestant aspect of the processes of religious convergence was primarily a claimed and enforced authority of interpretation over them. „In this way the evolutionary convergence toward a defined category ‘religion’ appears to be a Protestantization [Protestantisierung], especially since converging traditions (in this case Judaism and Islam) themselves understood the Protestant frame of reference as that of their own convergence.“ (p. 140)

Schulze concurs with the observation that Protestantism was not „a simple return to evangelical teachings“ (p. 159) but came to consider itself as the telos of a convergence of all religions. This „authority of interpretation“ based itself, according to Schulze, on scholarly biblical research through the disciplines of philology, mythology, archaeology and a biblical anthropology, in other words through the analysis of the religious narrative. This interpretation absorbed, at the same time, an Enlightenment emphasis on the autonomous individual and the promotion of the internalization of the religious, thereby separating it from traditional orthodox beliefs. Schulze quotes Paul Tillich for the universality of Protestant interpretation because of its unique relation to secularism. In other words, Protestantism seems to show the way for all religions to survive in a secular world.

Schulze barely touches upon the response of Catholicism to „Protestantization“ but he shows clearly to what extent Judaism accepted the Protestant model of interpretation in the second half of the 19th century. He ascribes a particular role to Ignaz Goldziher in this process: comparative mythology as an academic discipline was soon considered synonymous with the „science of religion“ (Religionswissenschaft). Goldziher „tried to raise the value of Jewish tradition by attaching it to a mythology and to historicize religion by attaching it to a mythology“ (p. 163). Schulze seems to agree with Goldziher that the Protestantization of Islam remains an unaccomplished project because of the „apparent resistance of Muslim theologians and intellectuals to accept historical critique as a

---

metatheory ... Only with a truly historical critique of the Koran conditions would be fulfilled to recognize Islam as a modern religion" (p. 164). Schulze believes, however, that this critique, exercised by Western Islamwissenschaftler, has been so successful that today Muslim theologians cannot ignore this new frame of reference anymore. Yet, the question remains whether this discussion can at all be valid when led by proxy. In the meantime the Pakistani scholar Fazlul Rahman had to emigrate to Chicago to be able to continue with his Koranic studies, Zaid Abu Nasr had to leave for Europe to escape serious threats to his life in Egypt.

This very thoughtful essay, though sometimes very densely written and not easily accessible to the non-specialist, raises another question. Does the Protestantization of religion, that is its „modernization“, not lead to a profound loss of meaning and authority of religion or to a point where its (perceived) success has spawned – unintentionally – a whole new wave of radical fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam?

Late antiquity as a common ground for all three monotheistic religions is a very fashionable theme and hotly debated. Georges Tamer points in his „Hellenistic Ideas of Time in the Koran“ to the parallelism of concepts of time with terms for eternal time, periods of time and life time of the human being. But similarity is not necessarily proof a connection, not to speak of a causal connection as such concepts of time could easily be developed in several cultures independently. Maybe Gustave von Grunebaum was right to look only at the translations from Greek to Arabic as provable influence (p. 21). Claude Gilliot discusses the Jewish-Christian environment for the Koranic text, trying to prove „a history of the Koran before the Koran“ (p. 73), especially the existence of „Aramaic traces“. He clearly is bent on providing proof for the „Late-Antiquity“ thesis.

A third article, only indirectly connected with this thesis, is Michael Kreutz' „The Greek classics in modern Middle Eastern thought“. He rightly points out the massive translation work from European languages into Arabic during the second half of the 19th century. As for his second argument that

„Arab intellectuals were delighted upon this revelation [that the uniting element of all European countries was the common Greek heritage] since the Islamic civilization was enormously shaped by the reception of the ancient Greek philosophers“ (p. 79), this may be true for the Greeks, the Albanians and the Macedonians but in respect to Arab intellectuals it is a wild exaggeration. Unfailingly Sulayman al-Bustani's translation of the Iliad is quoted as an example for this argument. In the Arab contemporary press it got some appreciative reviews, but in terms of impact the translations of Samuel Smiles' „Self Help“ (London 1866) und Demoline's „A quoi tient la supériorité anglo-saxonne“ (Paris 1897) were many times more discussed, reviewed and quoted. Perhaps the translation of the Iliad was only an exercise to widen the horizons of Arabic poetry as Faris Nimr and Ya'qub Sarraf suggested.<sup>1</sup> A last comment: The term Nahda does not mean literally „renaissance“, in Lane's Arabic Dictionary of 1877 it is translated as „a single act of rising, a motion, movement“. Later, in Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Arabic (1952), we find new meanings such as 'advancement', 'progress' and terms implying a repetition such as 'resurgence', 'revival', 'renaissance'. Translating nahda by renaissance means prejudging the movement in European terms.

Maurus Reinkowski's article is a case study of conspiracy theories in the Middle East. This is a very depressing but convincing analysis of the importance of such theories in the political discourse of today's Middle East.

John Efron's essay „Sephardic beauty in the eye of the Ashkenazi beholder“ offers a very original aesthetic approach to the Ashkenazi attempt to create a „new Jew“ with a new but also more „authentic“ identity at the end of the 19th century. This attempt began with the observation that Sephardim still pronounced Hebrew in the „authentic“ way. Following Renan's thesis of the link between language and race but not his evaluation of the Semitic languages, Sephardim had to be, therefore, also physically and psychologically closer to the original Jews of Antiquity. It were exclusively Ashkenazis, in particular Zionists with

---

<sup>1</sup>Dagmar Glaß, *Der Muqataf und seine Öffentlichkeit*, Würzburg 2004, p. 242.

their program to return also to the territorial origins, who found in the Sephardim the ideal of the strong, good-looking, tanned etc. race of the old/new Jew. The all-pervasiveness of racist thinking in the second half of the 19th century remains a depressing thought.

Worth mentioning is also the highly interesting essay by Israel J. Yuval, „The orality of Jewish oral law: from pedagogy to ideology“; his major thesis is that the development of Rabbinic Judaism was not a natural outflow from the Bible and the Second Temple Judaism but the result of the conflict with early Christianity: without St. Paul no Rabbi Akiva.

Likewise, Yosef Kaplan's article „Between Christianity and Judaism in early modern Europe: The confessionalization process of the Western Sephardi Diaspora“ deserves mentioning. The shifting positions of the „conversos“ to „new Christians“ to „new Jews“ and the formation of the northwest European Sephardic communities from the 16th to 18th century are a fascinating topic which is analyzed on a broad background of the confessionalization of religion in Europe at that time.

The section on law and economy contains very readable essays; noteworthy is especially Kilian Bälz' article „Sharia Jet Set? Perspectives of religion, law and the economy of Islam“. He analyzes the hiring of Muslim scholars by „Islamic“ banks in order to obtain for their banking protocol certificates confirming their adherence to the Sharia. It is somewhat reminiscent of the well established business of certifying Kashrut of food production - only the fees seem to be much lower in the latter case.

The book addresses itself to an academic public. The very expansive formulation of the title of the volume, in terms of time and religions forces the reader to pick the one or two articles that might relate to his or her specialty.

HistLit 2012-2-142 / Thomas Philipp über Gall, Lothar; Willoweit, Dietmar (Hrsg.): *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Course of History. Exchange and Conflicts*. München 2011, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 29.05.2012.