

Religion in the Social Sciences: A Socio-Epistemological Critique

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ABSTRACT

In the effort to conceptualise social phenomena, social scientists are faced with the fundamental epistemological problem of having to translate cultural terms into scientific concepts, in the course of which the cultural contexts in which such terms are embedded are often neglected, or even systematically excluded. This can result in a 'loss of reality', and a corresponding danger of misinterpretation, in particular in cross-cultural and comparative studies. In this paper, this epistemological problem is discussed with respect to the concept of religion. For this purpose, the specific period of European cultural history in which this concept emerged, as well as the trajectories of its generalisation to a concept which appears to be universally applicable, is reconstructed and described. At the same time, an attempt is made to show how the original cultural meanings of the term have survived the efforts to generalise it, and how the concept of 'religion' as it is commonly used in the social sciences today still carries a hidden cultural load which could bias theory construction and empirical research. The paper argues for a methodology of 'heightened reflexivity' towards the cultural history of the core concepts which in the social sciences tend to be used in a definitory fashion.

Keywords: Religion, social sciences, epistemology, heightened reflexivity, culture

ABSTRAK

Dalam usaha mengkonsepsikan fenomena sosial, ahli sains sosial berhadapan dengan masalah epistemologi yang asas, iaitu menterjemah istilah budaya menjadi konsep saintifik. Dalam usaha berbuat demikian, konteks budaya yang menghasilkan istilah itu sering diabaikan atau disisihkan secara sistematik; menyebabkan bukan sahaja berlakunya 'kehilangan realiti' tetapi juga terdapat bahaya salah tafsiran, terutamanya dalam kajian silang budaya dan bandingan. Dalam makalah ini, persoalan epistemologi ini dibincangkan dalam hubungan dengan konsep agama. Untuk itu, makalah ini mengkonstruksi semula dan menghuraikan tempoh khusus dalam sejarah budaya Eropah yang menghasilkan konsep ini, dan juga trajektori generalisasinya sehingga ia menjadi satu konsep yang diterimapakai secara umum. Pada

masa yang sama, makalah ini juga menunjukkan bagaimana makna budaya yang asal istilah itu dapat bertahan walaupun istilah itu cuba digeneralisasikan, dan bagaimana konsep 'agama' seperti yang biasa digunakan dalam sains sosial hari ini mengandungi satu kandungan budaya yang tersembunyi yang boleh menyebabkan berlakunya keberatsebelahan dalam pembinaan teori dan penyelidikan empiri. Makalah ini menganjurkan para ahli sains sosial supaya menggunakan satu metodologi 'refleksiviti yang ditingkatkan' terhadap sejarah budaya pelbagai konsep teras yang umumnya digunakan oleh para ahli sains sosial secara definitif.

Kata kunci: Agama, sains sosial, epistemologi, refleksiviti yang ditingkatkan, budaya

THE EUROPEAN CRITIQUE OF RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

When the social sciences began to take shape in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, they were strongly influenced by an intellectual tradition which had emerged from the French Enlightenment and which focused on a systematic and historical *Religionskritik* or *critique* of religion. Some of the influential writings published in the second half of the 18th century on the role of religion in supporting the social and political *ancien regime* of the European societies of that time are early examples of concise social scientific analyses of societal structures and large-scale social change. The best known of these writings is Paul Thiery d'Holbach's (1768, 1820) attempt to depict the function of religious ideas in diverting the awareness of people away from the injustices they had to suffer under an authoritarian monarchic regime, as well as to expose the multifaceted involvement of the church hierarchy in the power structure of this regime (Holbach 1768). This critique of religion continued to prevail as a key issue in many early contributions to the formation of the social sciences in 19th century Europe; for Karl Marx, for instance, the critique of religion was a prerequisite for all social critique and analysis.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, a change of perspective can be observed in the approach to religion in the social sciences: the topic of religion remains central, but *analysis* instead of *critique* gains ground. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who are considered to be among the most outstanding founding fathers of sociology as the core discipline of the social sciences, devoted much of their work to the analysis of religion and its impact on the structure and transformation of societies. Both now seemed to have accepted the *givenness* of religion in human societies, and they concentrated their efforts on the question of *how to define* religion as a sociological category, and *how to analyse* its social functions. This perspective provided the basis for establishing the sociological sub-discipline called *sociology of religion* which unfolded

throughout the 20th century in the academic organisation of sociology in the West, and which, at the same time, proceeded to incorporate, under the label of *comparative religion*, the plurality of religions to be found elsewhere in the world, thus also drawing from research in other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and linguistics.

Since the middle of the 20th century, however, the topic of religion has become more and more marginal in over-all social analysis and has been relegated to a sub-discipline, viz the sociology of religion. There are, for instance, introductory texts into the social structure of contemporary German society in which religion is not mentioned at all, apart from a footnote here and there which may point to studies of the German 'religious scene', to be found among the publications in the field of the sociology of religion. At the same time, within this sub-field of sociological research, the horizon in which religious phenomena is perceived has shrunk to that of a church-related character. Moreover, the observation that the societies of the West seemed to be undergoing a progressive process of secularisation was – and still is – often used to legitimise the marginalisation of the topic of religion in the analysis of 'modern' societies. Where there has been a resurgence of interest in the sociology of religion in the recent past, it has remained confined to this view of religion as a sub-societal phenomenon.

This brief, and certainly all too sketchy, description of the trajectory of the topic of religion in the social sciences since their emergence in Europe in the 19th century indicates three major turning points. One is the turn from a critique to the analysis of religion, the other the turn from focusing on Christian religion in Western societies to a comparative perspective on religions found everywhere. The third was then a compartmentalization and marginalization of the study of religion.

The theoretical implications of this particular genealogy were profound. First of all, we have to bear in mind that the European intellectual critique of religion had carved a certain conceptual framework for dealing with religion which the social sciences inherited when they began to emerge. This conceptual framework was mainly characterised by two main assumptions: the view of religion as a social force which can be distinctly separated from other social forces shaping human societies, and the view of religion as a relic of the past, incompatible with what was conceived of as a 'modern', 'enlightened' society. These two assumptions were interdependent: the emancipation of 'modern' society from its past, which is shaped and determined by a religious order, involved an understanding of religion as something distinct and separate, from which emancipation could be achieved.

The second turn or move towards a comparative study of religions led to a focus on *religion as such*, since it is held to be self-evident that we cannot perceive of, let alone *compare*, religions without a pre-formed notion of what religion is (or should be), ie. without a comprehensive concept of it. The early representatives of the European critique of religion were not much troubled by

the question of how to define or to conceptualise religion. Religion was then a cultural term. There was just one religion present in the social and cultural horizon on which they focused, although it was split into several denominations (called 'confessions'): the Christian one. This religion offered a wealth of indicators for description and analysis since it was highly institutionalised. The elaborate organisation of the Christian church(es) thus provided for an easy means to identify religion. If these enlightened critics of religion had a problem of definition at all, it was an internal and a more normative one, namely, how to determine the true character of Christian religion behind, and perhaps in, all the phenomena of its innerworldly appearance, including its involvement with the power structure of the European societies of the period.

The problem of how to define or conceptualise religion for the sake of social scientific analysis became relevant only in the second half of the 19th century, when the awareness and knowledge about religions other than the Christian had trickled down into the minds of European social scientists and brought about the need for a comparative perspective on religion. This was reinforced, and this is important to note, by the emergence within European societies of innerworldly oriented *Weltanschauungen* – systems of ideas and practices on how to view, and how to cope with, the world: political ones such as liberalism, socialism and nationalism, and popular-scientific ones such as evolutionism and Darwinism – which challenged the hitherto dominant social role of Christian religion. Since then, there has been an ongoing, and seemingly endless, debate in the social sciences on how to define religion as a general, if not universal, category, identifying the essential properties of religion *as such* and, by so doing, encompassing the entire spectrum of contemporary as well as historical religions.

The efforts to arrive at a definition of this kind are meanwhile legion; basically they follow one of those two seemingly opposite ways which Durkheim and Max Weber tried to pave in their pioneering writings at the turn of the 19th century: either to start empirical analysis on the grounds of a preconceived, comprehensive, and coherent definition of religion which can be arrived at by a systematic exploration of our knowledge of it (Durkheim), or to move into the empirical world of religious phenomena, explore it thoroughly and, step by step, try to climb up the ladder of abstraction and generalise the essence of our empirical observations within a comparative perspective (Weber). Both these approaches to deal with religion in the social sciences, diametrically opposed to each other as they may appear at first glance, have in common the focus on a definition of religion as the proper means of securing and validating social scientific knowledge on a phenomenon in question.

A different approach shall be outlined here. I suggest to forget for a while the social scientist's obsession with comprehensive definitions providing the basis for empirical research and theory construction. Instead, attention will be drawn to the fact that, as Durkheim has phrased it in his famous essay on *The*

Rules of the Sociological Method (first published in French in 1895), “human beings do not wait for the social scientists to comprehend, to interpret, and to attach names and concepts to the social and cultural relations they live in; they perpetually do it themselves”. Interaction among human beings, and the structures emerging from this interaction, are permeated by discursive and conceptual efforts to come to terms (in the twofold meaning of this phrase) with social and cultural realities, and to open them up for alternative visions and for structural change.

The vast majority of the words and concepts used in the social sciences do not originate in these sciences themselves but in the social and cultural reality which they are meant to describe. This causes one of the most important, and yet often neglected, epistemological problems in the social sciences: social scientists translate *cultural terms* into *scientifically defined concepts*, and in so doing, they tend to eliminate the social and cultural contexts within which these terms came into being, and which, it should be noted, continue to determine (filtered through changes over time) the communication between the members of a society about the social reality they are living in. However, the cultural connotations associated with such terms tend to linger in the ways in which they are used in the social sciences, be it tacitly or overtly. This can severely impinge on, if not distort, the empirical and theoretical endeavours of the social sciences, and their results.

Thus, it is suggested here that social scientists, instead of thoughtlessly translating cultural terms into defined concepts, should carefully try to reconstruct the contexts within which these terms came into being and were further developed. This would include the circumstances under which they emerged, the social and cultural problems and conflicts they were meant to describe and to resolve, and the way their meaning has changed over time. Among German historians and philosophers there is a strong school focusing on the conceptual history of basic terms used in the social and cultural sciences (cf. Koselleck 1979, & Brunner et al 1972). The process of concept formation in the social sciences will be enriched by such an exercise, and it will help to prevent social scientists from projecting terms particular to certain cultures and historical epochs onto others by moulding them into abstract definitions – an operation which tends to undermine comparative efforts in the social sciences.

In the following, the term *religion* shall be subjected to such an exercise, and some conclusions will be drawn from this exercise as to a *culturally reflected* mode of handling this term as a concept in the social sciences.

THE CULTURAL TRAJECTORY OF THE TERM ‘RELIGION’

The etymology of the Latin word *religio* is still controversial. In the Roman Empire, this word was used to denote the multiplicity of cults which were in

existence in the numerous and highly diverse regions under Roman sovereignty around the Mediterranean Sea, including the cult practised in Rome itself. This word was hardly more than a collective name; no substantive meaning was ascribed to it, by which, for instance, the various cults practised in the Roman Empire could be understood and interpreted as species or manifestations of a *general* 'religion', – or by which certain cults could be denounced as aberrant or heretic.

When the Christians began to spread over the Eastern parts of the empire, they were, initially, also seen as practitioners of a cult, to be tolerated as all the others. With time, this perception changed as their claim to represent a belief system of ultimate truth rendered them into a social force threatening the stability of the empire. Finally, when the Roman rulers converted to Christianity in the fourth century, and the centre of the empire shifted to Europe, the Christian belief system became dominant. It absorbed or suppressed the previous cults, and established itself as a 'universal' institution, the church.

In this new situation, the Latin word *religio* lost its meaning as a collective term. At the same time, there was no need to apply it to Christianity since it was the only existing and acknowledged belief system penetrating all spheres of life. Throughout the Middle Ages, the word *religio* had no public prominence, and it was used within Christian theology only for minor purposes, e.g. to characterise the specific manner in which the monks dedicated their minds and lives to Jesus Christ.

The career of the term 'religion' (in inverted commas here to refer to its specific character as a cultural concept) as it is used today began in Europe in what is known as the Age of Reformation – with the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism which started with Martin Luther's famous *Wittenberg theses*, named after the place where he first issued them. In these theses, Luther basically argued against the overwhelming power of the traditional papal regime in matters of the church as well as in those of politics. He protested against the deformation of basic principles of Christian belief under the influence of feudal rulers and parts of the clergy who had become captives of the medieval system of power in Europe. And he argued vehemently against a church structure in which the masses of Christian believers were held under the tutelage of the clergy.

Leaving aside all the complex implications of the Reformation on the history of Europe, we can focus here on one of Luther's basic principles which contributed to the rise of the modern cultural term of 'religion', namely, on his proclamation of the priesthood of all Christian believers. This basic Protestant principle shaped the realm of meaning within which the cultural term 'religion' now became prominent: as a designator for a mode of Christian belief and for a way of Christian life *apart from*, if not in contrast to, the institutional setting of the church, and the dogmatic system it represented and taught. 'Religion' was now conceived of as an oppositional term – opposed to the claim of the church and its representatives, the clergy, to enshrine and protect, as an institution, the

ultimate truth of Christian belief. According to Luther, the primary competency and capacity to interpret the Bible and to give testimony to its contents and meaning in everyday life was with the Christian believer, with the Christian *layman* (a cultural term which also emerged in this context).

This reformatory principle – of the priesthood of believers – had tremendous repercussions on the organisation of social life, in particular in those urban areas of Central Europe in which the Protestant movement spread rapidly. For instance, many of the guilds, which were highly influential occupational associations in the cities, transferred to their chairmen the right to conduct common prayers, to interpret decisions that had to be taken in the light of the scripture, and even to administer the sacraments; the pastor assigned to them by the church acted merely as a consultant. Similarly, the *pater familias*, the head of the family, was considered to be the *priest of the family*, conducting prayers and guiding the interpretation of the Bible with regard to family events and conflicts. In instances like this, and many others, there was an explicit reference to ‘religion’: *layman’s* ‘religion’ as opposed to the authoritative teachings of the church. Since then, the cultural term religion carries the connotation of a habitualised pattern resting on the direct relationship between God and the believer, and embedded in the life-world of the community of believers.

The churches in Europe which emerged from the Reformation soon, of course, developed their own problems with this phenomenon of the *layman’s* ‘religion’. They had adopted the institutional framework of the church within which Christianity had established itself over the centuries, albeit severing its bonds to Rome, ‘territorializing’ it according to regional political structures, and ‘de-hierarchizing’ it. Nevertheless, this new organisational type of Protestant churches, conceived originally to protect the new Christian layman’s religious culture, soon developed its own institutional claims to the monopoly of Christian beliefs and norms. Over the centuries to follow, we can observe an ongoing effort on the part of these churches to bring the Protestant layman’s culture back under its roof, to domesticate the layman’s ‘religion’, and to reclaim the ultimate authority for defining what the ‘true’ Christian beliefs are, and for prescribing the right way of Christian life. Indeed, the cultural history of European Protestantism from the 18th to the 20th century can be understood as a continuous effort on the part of the Protestant churches to re-absorb and re-incorporate that which had originally meant to emancipate itself from the papal regime, and now tended to disengage as ‘religion’ from *them* as well.

THE GENERALISATION OF THE EUROPEAN TERM ‘RELIGION’

There is a second track along which the trajectory of the term ‘religion’ began to proceed in Europe in the post-Reformation era. The schism between the papal-oriented tradition of Christian belief (which now became known as *Catholicism*

in a narrowed sense) and the new reformatory orientation provided an impetus to the search for an umbrella term under which both could be subsumed. To find such a term was now much more difficult than in the era of the first schism in Christianity when East Rome (Byzanz) and West Rome separated from each other in the 4th century. That schism had been along clearly demarcated territorial lines, with the Eastern Orthodox churches representing Christendom in those parts of Europe which had now ceased to be under the influence of the Pope in Rome. Thus both the Orthodox, as well as the Catholic, Church, had no major problems in describing themselves, as well as the other, as Christian, although, of course, each of them conceived of itself as representing a 'more true' understanding of the Christian beliefs. In contrast, the schism brought about by the Reformation split Christianity within the same spatial realm of the European continent. Given this co-presence, and the simultaneous claim to be 'Christian', there emerged a need to introduce a fresh concept which could encompass them both and, at the same time, distinguish what they had in common from the world in which both of them enfolded their missionary activities, and which now became identifiable as the secular world.

Initially, the term 'confessions' was used to denote the now separated branches of European Christianity, but soon, the term religion embarked on a new career, on the grounds that a more general expression of what Christianity was all about, beyond its schisms and splits, was needed. A strong push was given to this development by the devastating Thirty Years War (1618-1648) during which Catholic and Protestant oriented political powers all over Europe fought each other under the banners of differing interpretations of the Christian truth as well as of secular interests, unwittingly strengthening the call for a 'true religion' beyond the rivalry and the conflicts into which the existing Christian confessions had become embroiled. Last but not least, the knowledge of belief systems other than the familiar Christian ones began to spread in Europe, and these also supported the idea of a 'general religion'. The *generalisation* of the cultural concept of 'religion' as it had been born in the European Age of Reformation began its new trajectory.

Among the early documents providing proof of this development is the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, a fictitious discussion between six representatives of different belief systems published in 1593 by the French philosopher and lawyer Jean Bodin. In this panel of six he assembled a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Muslim, an adherent to a 'religion of reason' without a dogmatic system, and a 'religious universalist'. Whilst the first three represented the Christian *cosmos* of his time, the latter two stood for those attempts to arrive at a more generalised understanding of 'religion' which had emerged in the post-Reformation era. It is highly significant that Bodin also included a Muslim into his panel: if the Islamic world had been viewed hitherto by the Christian world as a misguided belief system, as a phenomenon of paganism and infidelity, it now became a partner in the search for a generalised understanding of

'religion'. The way in which Bodin structured this fictitious colloquium was clearly guided by the idea of religious tolerance, and this idea presupposes that all those involved in it are recognised and acknowledged as forms of 'religion' – the Christian partners as well as the Muslim one, and those two who were meant by Bodin to represent some kind of a 'secular religion'.

This indicates that the range of generalisations at which the term 'religion' should finally arrive in the 19th and 20th century had already been reached at that early stage – covering not only those belief systems which had begun to think of themselves, and of each other, as 'religions', but also more 'secular', comprehensive 'Weltanschauungen' like political and social ideologies which could be thought of as fulfilling functions similar to those which 'religions' tend to fulfil in social life. The rise of this idea of 'functions of religion(s)' is closely connected with the generalisation of this term.

According to Durkheim and the 'functionalist school' in sociology drawing from his theory, 'religions' contribute to the ultimate integration of societies and, thus, to their ability to survive; other systems of ideas and beliefs not thinking of themselves as 'religions' can then also be subsumed under this functional concept. On this level, the generalisation of the term 'religion' arrived at its peak of abstraction – meaning everything and nothing, and opened to an endless and arbitrary process of definition and re-definition. It is precisely this high level of abstraction onto which the term of 'religion' has been elevated over the last centuries which tends to disguise the cultural context within which it emerged, and by this tends to open the doors for an uncontrolled, 'undercover' projection of the specific meaning it had in a certain period of European cultural history onto other times and cultures.

This projectory use of the term is already evident in Bodin's Colloquium. He constructs the exchange of ideas between the fictitious participants in this discussion with the aim of identifying some 'general religion' *behind* and *in* existing 'religions'. Yet he does so in a fashion which clearly originates from the particular cultural configuration of the post-Reformation era in Europe. He searches for a concept capable of bridging the gap between the now divided Christian confessions. His reference to Islam serves as some kind of a supportive argument in this search, not more and not less. He still assumes that Christianity is, and will, remain the *ultimate* form of 'religion'. And he aims at an understanding of 'religion' which owes itself to the reformatory principle of the *priesthood of all believers*: 'religion' as it is held and lived by the community of believers, not as it is authoritatively taught by an institution.

When, subsequently, the European critique of religion emerged as part of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the generalisation of the term 'religion' had already reached an advanced stage. At the same time, the cultural origin of this term was still present in the ways it was used. Accordingly, most of the critics of religion presented their ideas with reference to some kind of a general 'religion'; but their criticism aimed *de facto* at the Christian 'religion' of their

time, neglecting the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, and devoid of any comparative perspective on non-Christian 'religions'. Moreover, their criticism focused on the Christian church(es) – on their claim to be the guardians and warrantors of Christian truth, on their means to uphold and carry through this claim, and on their powerful and dominating position in public life.

'Religion' as a lay counterpart to the Christian church(es), as it had developed in the post-Reformation era, was hardly taken into consideration. This was so partly because the intellectuals engaged in this critique of religion had already, like most of the later Western intellectuals, embarked on the path of agnosticism, if not atheism. In their perspective, 'church' and 'religion' were just two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, this was so partly also because the 'church(es)' had already been successful, to a certain degree, in reclaiming their sovereignty over how to define 'religion' against the layman's culture.

The intellectual movement called critique of religion itself played a major role in further generalising the meaning of the term 'religion' by ignoring its specific cultural connotations. Throughout the 18th and 19th century the focus of this movement was on the social role of the 'church' and of 'religion' in deluding people with regard to their human, social and political position in this world, preventing their 'emancipation' into self-responsible individuals. As far as the reformatory version of 'religion' came into focus at all, it was conceived of as the "opium of the people" (Marx), a grand mode of self-deception *vis-a-vis* their social and intellectual suppression and impoverishment in 'this world' – which actually was the European world of *this time*.

THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS' DILEMMATA WHEN DEALING WITH 'RELIGION'

There are two major insights emerging from this brief excursion into the cultural history of the term 'religion' which have to be borne in mind when looking into the actual use that is made of this term in the contemporary social sciences.

Firstly: the vast majority of Western social scientists tend to be agnostic in their personal as well as in their intellectual orientation. They are successors of and heirs to the European critique of religion which preceded the emergence of the social sciences in the West, whether they are aware of it or not. They tend to approach phenomena of 'religion' in 'modern societies' from an agnostic viewpoint, from which 'religion' is a phenomenon which is not part of *their* social and intellectual world.

This viewpoint, deeply rooted in the traditional European image of what social scientists do and have to do, is supported by the theoretical framework which they have constructed since they began to play their role in Europe in the

late 19th century, and which portrays 'modern' (Western) societies as developing from their origin in 'traditional' societal forms by, among other characteristics, emancipating themselves from the all-embracing social and political influence and role of (Christian) 'religion'. 'Religion' is thus set apart as a specific phenomenon which owes its present existence in 'modern' societies to the survival of 'traditional' elements on the one hand, and to *private, subjective* convictions and commitments on the other.

Secondly: at the same time, social scientists, when approaching contemporary 'religious' phenomena, tend to conceive of them within a realm of cultural meanings which is derived precisely from that cultural (Christian) tradition from which 'modern' societies are thought of as having departed from. Whenever social scientists talk about 'religion', they think of it, in theoretical and conceptual terms, as being set in an *institutional-individual* (church-believer) dichotomy as it characterises the cultural development of European Christianity. In their empirical research, they tend to focus, guided by the reformatory understanding of 'religion', on the believer's 'religion'; they try to figure out what the 'religious' beliefs of people are and how these beliefs relate to an 'official' system of 'religious' ideas and teachings as represented by some kind of institutional 'religion': by churches, by a 'religious' ruler or by a clerical hierarchy, by powerful socio-'religious' organisations or by a charismatic 'religious' leader and his entourage. In all this, they also tend to view 'religious' phenomena as particular ones, set apart from the major structures of society, thus carrying on the heritage of the European critique of religion. The generalisation of the original reformatory understanding of 'religion' as it occurred within the Christian tradition itself helps them to look at 'religion' *everywhere in the contemporary world* as something which is shaped and structured in similar fashion to that which emerged in the Western world and its Christian tradition under this conceptual label.

There is, one could say, a deeply rooted bias in the way in which 'religion' is being dealt with in the social sciences as they originated in the West. But not much is achieved by a statement like this. Generally, we think of a bias as something which can be overcome by means of rational operation once it has been identified. However, in our case, talking about 'religion', we have to deal with the impact of deeply rooted cultural traditions on concept formation in the social sciences, and this impact cannot be eradicated once and for all by some kind of terminological or definitional operation. As in many other cases of basic concepts in the social sciences as well, this impact can only be kept under control by a continuous epistemological effort – by a heightened reflexivity when transferring cultural concepts as they emerge from the self-designation of social and cultural processes onto the necessarily abstract level on which the conceptual language of the social sciences is being built.

This exercise of heightened reflexivity has to take into account the fact that the social sciences are not in possession of an *archimedic point* beyond the

social and cultural reality with which they are concerned. They are part of it, and though they have their special part in striving for a distanced, critical, and comparative perspective on social and cultural reality, they cannot escape from it. To illustrate further how such an epistemological heightened reflexivity can operate in the social sciences with respect to how they deal with 'religion', two more tracks of thought shall be added here. Firstly, we shall ask what it means to engage in 'comparative religion', and secondly, we shall ask what is meant when social scientists talk about 'secularisation'.

COMPARATIVE 'RELIGION'

There is a common saying that apples cannot be compared with pears. There is another saying, attributed to Walter Rathenau, a German writer and politician of the twenties, that thinking is basically comparative by nature ('Denken heißt Vergleichen'). The first saying suggests a very restrictive method of comparison which is confined to objects classified as belonging to the same group of objects. The second statement suggests that we compare whenever we begin to think: we establish thoughts and concepts by virtue of contrasts. Both these statements mark extreme positions; as is often the case, the truth may be found in the middle.

Usually, it is maintained that for purposes of comparison, a third unit, which, in terms of abstraction is located on a level beyond that on which the objects to be compared, has to be defined: a *tertium comparationis*. The term 'religion' seems to be a unit like this, under which the various forms of 'religions' can be subsumed and compared according to the properties of 'religion' as such incorporated in the definition of this term (for more details, see Matthes 1992).

In the case of 'apples' and 'pears' this may work since the properties of these two classes of objects can easily be ascertained and assembled in a definition of what 'apples' and 'pears' are like. If one were to compare 'apples' to 'pears', one would have to establish, on a higher level of abstraction, a *tertium comparationis* in relation to which both of them can be viewed – e.g. 'fruit' if 'apples' and 'pears' were to be compared with respect to their natural structure, or 'taste', with respect to their impact on human gustatory nerves.

In the social sciences there is, however, as already outlined above, a two-fold basic problem when applying the principle of a *tertium comparationis*: the objects they deal with tend to define and to conceptualise *themselves*, before social scientists begin to deal with, and to give names to, them. And: these cultural self-definitions and self-conceptualisations tend to vary over time and space, historically and culturally. Thus, the social sciences, when comparing social and cultural phenomena over time and space, always run the risk of establishing a *tertium comparationis* by projecting a specific social or cultural phenomenon, given in a certain time and under certain conditions, onto a higher

level of abstraction by transforming its cultural *self-definition* into a scientifically conceptualised *general* one, and then to look at the *other* phenomenon in the light of the *first* one from which the *tertium comparationis* was projected. An operation like this however, cannot be deemed adequate since it assimilates – be it more or less overtly – the *second* phenomenon to the *first* one *before* embarking on the analysis which claims to be comparative.

If we take into account this epistemological problem which the social sciences inevitably have, we have to re-shape our understanding of what it means to compare ‘religions’. First of all, we have to consider the cultural and historical meanings the very term ‘religion’ tends to carry, mostly in an implicit way, as outlined in the passages above. Secondly, we have to take into consideration that a comparative study of ‘religions’ cannot be valid if it does nothing else but (1) *identify* ‘religious’ phenomena according to the criteria which have been established under certain historical and cultural conditions, and then (2) subsume these phenomena observable somewhere else in time and space, and identified as ‘religious’ ones in this fashion, under a general term of ‘religion’. This would be, in epistemological terms, a tautological operation; in terms of cultural analysis it would be an operation of *nostrification* – an attempt to assimilate the *other* to the *self*. Thirdly, we have to take into consideration that the term ‘religion’ has meanwhile been spread all over the world, and that this has to be seen as a cultural process which has had – and has – its repercussions on the ‘religious’ phenomena identified outside the realm of meaning within which this term gained its shape, which nonetheless does *not* necessarily mean that ‘religion’ has become the same everywhere.

Shingo Shimada (Straub and Shimada 1999) has recently unraveled this cultural transfer of the term ‘religion’ in the particularly intriguing case of Japan. There is no original term ‘religion’ in the Japanese language, and there is no cultural tradition in this country conceiving of itself according to those criteria usually associated with this term. During the Meiji Restoration in the second half of the 19th century however, an attempt was made to re-shape the Japanese state and society according to the European model. Since European societies of this time had something called ‘religion’, it was assumed that Japanese society, in its effort to ‘modernise’ itself, should also have something similar. A ministry was founded to determine the ‘religious’ foundation of a modern Japanese nation state, and Shintoism was proclaimed to be its basic ‘religion’.

To serve this function, Shintoism had to be ‘cleansed’ from alien elements, in particular from Buddhist ones, and it had to be institutionalised. The Shinto shrines were grouped into several ‘classes’ forming a hierarchy, at the top of which stood the *Ise*-shrine, the shrine of the Tenno-family. Under a concept of ‘religion’ derived from the European Christian tradition, a social and cultural scenario was created which, henceforth, could be identified, in the Western perspective, as ‘religion’, bearing characteristics such as a quasi-church struc-

ture, a pattern of 'belonging' to this church by observing certain ritual patterns, and even a notion of 'syncretism' as it had been developed in the Western Christian tradition: discarding *mixed* 'religious' settings and insisting on the purity of a religious belief system.

Since this new 'religious' order was introduced from above, it shaped the 'official' scenario of 'religion' in Japan, much to the liking of Western social scientists who now find in Japan a lot of indicators of 'religion' familiar to them, and who can even classify the widespread oscillating, indecisive, and 'syncretistic' practice of 'religious' everyday life in Japan as something they are familiar with: as 'popular religion', or as '*invisible religion*' (Luckmann 1967).

However, in order to study the contemporary 'religious' scenario in Japan in a truly comparative perspective, one cannot confine oneself to identifying those of its features which resemble those familiar to the 'home culture' of Western social scientists, and then to take them as another reprint of a general phenomenon called 'religion'. Rather, one has to study in detail, as Shimada has done, the manifold, and often contradictory, impact the very transfer of the term and concept of 'religion' has had, and continues to have, on this scenario. One can be guided in this enterprise by what I propose to call a 'lighthouse' concept of 'religion': one which bears in mind how this concept came into being elsewhere, and what load of connotations it carries. Only in so doing can one avoid essentialising this concept, that is to take it for the 'thing' it means.

If our attention is drawn to different cultural settings, we have to change our perspective and to activate different sources of knowledge. How to compare, for instance, Islam with Christianity? Obviously, there has been no original term and concept of 'religion' in the Islamic world as well. What has changed in the self-understanding, in the teachings, in the institutional settings, and in the belief practices of the Islamic world since this term and concept was introduced into it? Is there something like a 'hidden' cultural *Christianisation* going on in the Islamic world since it started to think of Islam as a 'religion'?

Regarding the classification of 'religions', Islam and Christianity are usually taken as prominent examples of 'monotheistic religions', and as such they are compared with 'polytheistic' religions such as Hinduism. But a comparative perspective like this remains rather superficial; further differentiation is necessary. For example, the 'monotheistic' character of Islam is much more consistent than that of Christianity, which comprises a passage between the transcendence of God and the immanence of this world by conceiving of Jesus Christ as God's son. This difference has enormous bearing on the world views and on the rules of conduct held by the followers of each of these two 'religions', e.g. regarding the relation between 'fate' and 'accountability' as understood in judging human behaviour and action. What is of importance here is the relation between these two principles, not their attribution to one or the other of these 'religions'. Misunderstandings like that are widespread in current studies of 'religions', and they have their roots in the classificatory method which goes

hand in hand with the definitional approach: certain features and patterns are attributed to one of the objects of comparison, and other features and patterns to others, instead of attention being focused on the different configuration of such features and patterns within each of the objects under study.

For a specific comparison between Islam and Christianity which does not aim at the totality of both, but on certain features they bear, one might focus on the social structures which have emerged from them. It has been pointed out earlier that there is a certain cultural tradition in Christianity of setting apart 'religion' and the 'secular world'. This division is reflected in the language and the conceptual body of the social sciences which tends to talk, for instance, about 'religion' mostly in conjunction with other basic concepts: 'religion' *and* society, 'religion' *and* culture, 'religion' *and* the state, 'religion' *and* politics, and also, 'religion' *and* the church. This way of understanding 'religion' as something that is *apart* from the secular world and, yet, has its own shape and standing in it, has not only to do with the opposition of *transcendence* and *immanence* on which Christianity as a monotheistic 'religion' is based. It has also to do with the fundamental Christian pattern of how 'religion' should be organised in this world. There are passages to be found in the Bible in which the Christians are invited, if not requested, to establish separate communities in which they congregate just *as believers*, for the sole purpose of worshipping God Father and Jesus Christ, – and that these congregations should be the very centre of their lives. Their membership in these communities should be the ultimate form of social life for them, and when entering the congregation of Christians, they should leave behind, even disconnect themselves from, all the other realms of social life and loyalties in which they were involved: family, kinship, neighbourhood, local communities, the political order.

The minority position of the first Christian communities in the Roman Empire strengthened this concept of *separateness*, of *apartness*, and certainly, this concept is one of the major factors which contributed to the rise of a highly institutionalised form of 'religious' organisation which is characteristic of, and unique, to Christianity: *the church*. To conceive of the church as an *institution* incorporating and manifesting 'religion' in *this* world is also part of the heritage Christianity owes to the Roman Empire and its elaborate legal system. To delink the 'religious' dimensions of life from the 'innerworldly' ones in such a rigorous fashion has exposed Christianity, in particular the single Christian believer, to the continuous necessity of defining its relationship to all kinds of 'innerworldly' social associations in which the Christian believer, *as a Christian*, had no *autochthonous* 'religious' position. The efforts undertaken in the post-Reformation era to authorise *social* associations in religious terms, as described in section 2 above, can be interpreted as attempts to cope with this 'Christian dilemma', a dilemma which is mirrored, on the other side, in the later efforts of the churches to regain control over the laymen's culture.

Though Islam shares, apart from its particular understanding of the nature of God, a number of dogmatic and moral features with Christianity, it does not, however, share this basic understanding of *separateness* and *apartness* of the 'religious' sphere from the 'innerworldly'. There are, of course, distinctions between Muslims regarding the intensity of their 'religious' commitment, and between the 'Muslim in the street' and clerics of different ranks and orientation; but basically, it is in the world of social and cultural relations, interaction, and associations that Islam was rooted. Whilst Christian 'religion' has, as European phenomenologists would phrase it, its *Sitz im Leben* (literally translated, *seat in life, location in life*) in the church and in the local Christian congregations in which it is organised, Islam's *Sitz im Leben* is more pronounced in everyday life, in the social and cultural bonds which connect people, in their ways of communicating with one another. True, Prophet Muhammad taught, as Reuben Levy phrases it, 'that Islam must take precedence over all other loyalties' (Levy 1962); but this principle was meant and taken as a regulatory one with respect to existing 'other loyalties'. In contrast, becoming a Christian, and being one, was conceived of as entering a mode of existence *beyond* the bonds and loyalties of the everyday world.

Western social scientists have their difficulties in dealing with Islam since the categories and methods they have developed to deal with 'religion' are modeled after the social and cultural history of Christianity, its achievements as well as its dilemmata, whether they may be aware of this or not. And since, in the mindset of Western social scientists, there is a built-in evolutionary assumption that Western societies emerging from the Christian tradition are, as 'modern' societies, the forerunners of all societies, they tend to look at Islamic societies as if they have *not yet* arrived at an understanding of 'religion' which is based on the same principles of *separateness* and *apartness* on which the Christian tradition is built. This statement sets the tone for the next, and final, topic we have to deal with here: the problem of secularisation.

THE TOPIC OF SECULARISATION

Subscribing to a method of cultural and conceptual analysis in the social sciences which views social facts as predominantly discursive ones, structured by interpretations which human actors attach to them in order to be able to cope with them, we should talk about secularisation as a topic, not as a factual process. As in the case of 'religion', the variety of events and conflicts, and the range of perspectives, under which these events and conflicts are perceived and interpreted *as* 'secularisation' in certain times and cultural settings by those participating in them, is too vast to allow for a clearcut definition of this concept for the purposes of social scientific analysis. Instead, we have again to ask how

this term came into being as an interpretative one, giving meaning to certain events under certain cultural conditions, and how it changed with time.

The Latin word *saecularis* is derived from the word *saeculum* which, in Roman times, stood for a certain time-span, usually that of a generation, or that of a period a ruling sovereign was in power. When Christianity began to dominate in the Roman Empire, the term *saeculum* was adopted into its theological language in a very specific sense: it was used to designate the time-span of *this* world, beginning with the appearance of the Saviour and ending with the re-appearance of the Saviour and the Last Judgement: *this* world was termed the *saecularis*, the *secular* one.

Later in the history of European Christianity, it was the controversy between the Pope, as the ultimate head of the church, and the Emperor of the European Holy Roman Empire, which succeeded the pre-Christian Roman one, over the right of investiture of the latter by the former, which attached a specific meaning to the distinction between the 'secular' and the 'sacred'. The separation of the state from the church which emerged from this controversy, and which began to dissolve the former unity of the *Orbis Christianum*, permuted the Christian dichotomy of *this* world and the *other* world into a secondary division within *this* world: the church became the representative of the *other* world within *this* world, and as such not 'really' of *this* world, though acting in it on behalf of the *other* world. This structural ambiguity of the church became a persistent source of controversies in Christian theology, culminating in the Age of Reformation when the contemporary church was heavily criticised for having become too much 'this-worldly', and when Luther, proclaiming the *priesthood of all believers*, opened a direct pathway from the Christian believer to God, bypassing the church as a mediator between them.

On these historical and cultural grounds, the concept of 'secularisation' began its career designating the separation of the political order from the church, as well as the emancipation of the Christian believer from the church. What was termed, at this time in history and in this context, 'religion', was somehow caught up in this twofold separation: 'religion' became a designator for how the Christian believers housed their Christian beliefs and practices within their life-world, and *in opposition* to what the church expected them to believe and to do; and at the same time, it was this 'religion' which the church struggled to get back under its roof. Similarly, 'religion' was banished from the political order, which attributed – and confined – it to the church, at the same time referring to it as something which had its original place in the minds of the believers who were the citizens the political order was made for.

Since, in the long run, the self-confident and proud Christian laity of the post-Reformation era (as briefly described above) lacked the means to maintain itself as a social formation independent of, but adjacent to the church, and since the influential and powerful institution of the church succeeded with time in reclaiming the conceptual authority to define what this-worldly 'religion'

should be, 'religion' became more and more individualised and 'privatised'. This was a protracted process in European Christianity, culminating in the 20th century in which the church(es) have lost most of their former influence on political and state affairs. 'Religion' has since become a 'private' matter of Christian believers, and the political order, *as well as* the institution of the church, can appeal to the 'private religion' of the de-churched masses of Christian believers for support for whatever public purposes, whenever it appears opportune to them. The emancipation of the political order from the church, and the subsequent reformatory emancipation of the Christian believer from the church, have ultimately produced a social system in which 'religion', one of the key interpretative concepts to push forward this process and to keep it going, has become some kind of a 'floating' phenomenon, 'invisible' (cf Luckmann 1967) and, yet, susceptible to activation and mobilisation for various purposes, by the political order as well as by the church(es).

It should be emphasised in this context that the term 'secularisation' does not only have pejorative, but also positive, connotations. As Protestant theologians, in particular, have repeatedly observed, this term also refers to the transference of Christian values, patterns of thought, and moral attitudes, into the 'secular' world. Thus, this term also indicates an innerworldly process of the Christianisation of society, a process by which values, patterns, and attitudes emerging from the Christian belief system become taken-for-granted in everyday life. This involves, by the same token, the danger that the awareness of their 'religious' origin may get lost precisely in this process of their becoming a 'reality' in social life.

Such is *secularisation*, from the viewpoint of cultural and conceptual analysis: a process deeply rooted in the particularities of the Christian belief system, of its social organisation and its impact on this-worldly matters and affairs. However, the very term 'secularisation' is open to its generalisation, and that is what social scientists have tended to do with it. Since the division of labour between our academic disciplines has also resulted in a profound ignorance of the knowledge housed in disciplines other than our own, social scientists often handle this concept, as many others, without any awareness of its origin and its complexity as a concept which has served as a means of self-understanding and self-conceptualisation in the social world itself. By generalising it, they convert it into a category which stands for the departure of 'modern' societies from their 'religious' rooting and background, for the diminishing role, if not disappearance, of 'religion' as the process of 'modernisation' of societies advances. Embedded in this – falsely – generalised concept of 'secularisation' is the assumption that *all* human societies *necessarily* follow a certain line and direction of development, and that this line and direction can be induced from that taken by Western societies.

To overcome this misguided fashion of handling the concept of 'secularisation', we have to bear in mind that the social and cultural process which it is

meant to designate is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition of the Western world, and that the invention and implementation of this concept is part of this process: it is a conceptual vehicle in the process of the self-understanding and self-interpretation of the Western world. Reflecting on that, we can no longer handle this concept as an abstract, general one – as one which can be applied universally. Rather, we have to ask, and we have to enrich our knowledge to be able to ask this way, if we can detect in *other* societies and their ‘religious’ settings structural conditions similar to those which brought about what has been called ‘secularisation’ in the Western Christian cultural tradition. Are there, on the other hand, structural conditions adverse to the rise of a configuration which caused the cultural label ‘secularisation’ to come into being? And, to resume Shingo Shimada’s perspective on ‘religion’ in Japan, in what ways did the spreading of a generalised concept of ‘religion’ over the world, so to speak, its ‘globalisation’, influence the self-perception of ‘religious’ worlds in other societies and cultures and made them change?

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Rather than summing up what has been outlined throughout this paper, I would like to present and discuss an example from my research experience. At the beginning of the 1980s, I took part in a research project in Singapore which was designed to examine the impact of ‘modernisation’ on various ‘religious’ communities in this society. Among the respondents I had to interview was an Indian lady in her late 20s, a computer specialist who had undergone her professional training in the West, and a Hindu by ‘religion’. The interview was designed as a narrative one, giving the respondent sufficient time to outline in detail what her ‘religious’ background and experience was, and to do so in a fashion which was not pre-shaped by special questions posed by the interviewer. After we had finished this lengthy interview, we sat together for a while, having drinks and talking about some of the events she had narrated in the interview, with some of her family members joining us. It was on this occasion that she added a remarkable comment to what she had outlined in the interview. She said:

‘Mind you, you have asked me to tell you how I understand myself as a Hindu. I have responded to this request to my very best. But, please, do not understand all that as if I have talked to you about my ‘religion’. I have passed through a Western education, and I think I know quite well how you Western people are used to think about man and God and about ‘religion’. So I talked to you as if ‘Hinduism’ were my ‘religion’, so that you may be able to understand what I mean. If you were a Hindu yourself, I would have talked to you in quite a different fashion, and I am sure both of us would have giggled about the idea that something like ‘Hinduism’ could be a ‘religion’, or that something like ‘Hinduism’ even exists. Please, don’t forget this when analysing all the stuff you have on your tapes.’

This comment of a respondent is instructive in many ways. It is a comment on the level of everyday life communication which reflects in a nutshell the problems social scientists have when dealing with 'religion'. It draws the attention of the social scientist to the fact that the concepts he uses have their own life in social reality, and that the most concise definition he can give to his concepts is worthless if it does not account for the realm of meanings these concepts cover in their use in everyday life. This comment also confronts social scientists with some kind of an 'Awas!' (caution!) signboard: the modes in which *they* define their concepts are being spread back into the language of everyday life without just being *taken over*; thus, the social scientist may encounter *his* concepts in the utterings of his respondents without being sure that they mean to them what they mean to him.

And finally: this comment provides for an illustrative example of the heightened reflexivity which is needed when applying cultural concepts developed in certain cultural settings to others. To encounter such heightened reflexivity in a comment given on the level of everyday communication is not surprising if one takes into account the multicultural and multi 'religious' setting in which the above respondent was living. Western social scientists on the other hand, who are mostly brought up and living in much more homogenous cultural milieus, even in the case of societies with a high level of immigration like the United States, have to invest special efforts to acquire this kind of heightened reflexivity. The fact that they have learnt how to eliminate the cultural implications of their terms and concepts by projecting them onto a higher level of abstraction, thus generalising their particularity, is a major obstacle for them to develop such heightened reflexivity.

Rethinking what 'religion' should mean in the language of the social sciences can thus prove to be an exercise in how to translate *cultural* concepts into *scientific* ones: not by abstractifying them and then assigning them a *universal* validity, but by carefully reconstructing their cultural career in a truly comparative fashion. Most of the core concepts used by social scientists, like that of 'religion', far from being universal *per se*, are still waiting to *become universalised* in this reflective fashion.

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