

The Study of Religions on Demand

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The theme of the 8th annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) is “Time of Decline, Time of Hope: Scientific, Cultural and Political Engagement of the Study of Religions”. The fact that the conference is held in Brno (Czech Republic) in 2008 is in itself a sign and a time of hope. Twenty years before such a conference would have been unthinkable. At that time Europe was still divided into two ideological blocks: the East and the West. It is worth remembering how difficult it was for the tourist from the West to travel to the East. A visa was needed and lots of controls made the crossing of the border rather unpleasant. For the tourist from the East it was hardly possible to visit places in the West. Now, 20 years later, travelling in both directions is possible. No visa is needed to cross the borders to the Czech Republic from Germany or Austria, no passport controls take place. Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic are, with twenty four others more, member states of the European Union. That this would be the case is far beyond the most courageous expectations and dreams that were expressed in the “spring of Prague” which was brutally brought to an end by the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops in August of 1968, exactly 40 years before this conference in Brno. All that shows that it is indeed a time of hope.

As concerns religion, it was seen in the East as a relic of the past. Where it was still practised, its rituals were considered to be museumlike displays of human behaviour which had survived so far but were thought to come to an end soon. Atheist instruction was included into the school curriculum in order to educate young people so that a scientific understanding of the world based on an atheist worldview (*Weltanschauung*) would prevail.

Religion in the West, on the contrary, was free and could be practised without any restrictions. Religious education was and still is part of the school syllabus in some countries such as for example Germany and Austria. The conviction of many intellectuals, however, was the same as in the East: they thought the time for religion was over, it would be replaced, in the long run, with secular, i.e. atheist forms of *Weltanschauung* so that in the West as well as in the East the Study of Religions as a discipline was similar to Archeology or, with regard to rituals still in practice, to folklore

ethnography. In no case, religion or religions was/were considered to be of any scientific, cultural or political relevance for the world of today.

The assumption that the time of religion was over was based on a noticeable lack of religious practice in the West so that secularisation was seen in progress and would finally become the dominant lifestyle worldwide. Consequently, the Study of Religions as a discipline was not needed anymore in the academic world. Political and Social Sciences became the leading sciences in the universities, Philosophy, in this context, was less concerned with metaphysics and truth claims than with a structuralist or Marxist interpretation of the world.

All this has changed in the meantime. Religions have moved from the margins to the centre of interests in politics. There is an enormous and urgent need for information about religions in particular and religion in general. This is and should be a time of hope for the Study of Religions. To prove this, the first part will deal with three types of studies that underline the importance of the Study of Religions as a discipline, but the second much shorter part will mention signs of decline which also exist for the Study of Religions, because of difficulties that arise from outside as well as from inside the discipline. All that will be summed up in the conclusion which nevertheless will stress the signs of hope more than those of decline.

Signs of hope I: The political scenario

Rarely in the past there was so much need for information regarding religion and religions as at present. Three types of studies may suffice to illustrate that need: the political scenario, the field of historical research, and the theory field.

The first signs of change in the secular thought came in the 1970s with the Christian, mainly Roman Catholic theology of liberation in South America and the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran was a great shock for the West when in the spring of 1979 Ayatollah Khomeiny successfully made the Shah leave from Iran and replaced the policy of modernization, which was fully backed up by the West, with a religiously orientated system of Islamic rule. Nobody had foreseen such a change. Western Orientalism was in search for modern thinkers of Islam and took no notice of what traditionalists and Islamists made circulate in mosque pamphlets to express their dissatisfaction with the Shah's modernization. When the bazaris and many other dissatisfied people joined the group of protesters, the end of the Shah's regime had come and modernity was replaced with Islam. This Is-

lam, however, was not a total turn away from modernity as many had claimed. It was certainly so in terms of society organization but technologically speaking, it was highly modern. Radio and TV as well as cassettes and satellite TV helped to propagate Khomeiny's ideas. From his headquarters in the surroundings of Paris Ayatollah Khomeiny teleguided the revolution in Iran. For the first time in modern history a revolution was successfully realized in the name of a concept which was not borrowed from the West but was authentically rooted in the country's own, namely religious tradition. Thus religious thought has won over secular concepts. Studies on Shi'ism became imperative. What was seen before as a rather strange subject of no interest for research changed into highly desirable studies of great political relevance. Consequently, studies on Shi'ism were on the agenda of research and research foundations were willing to pay for them. The successful revolution had thus its positive effect on the academic side of the Study of Religions, too, whereas before the revolution, only a very small number of specialists have ever undertaken to study Shi'ite Islam and its theology. It sounds strange but is true to say that when I started studying Shi'ism in 1970 the protesters of the 1968 students' revolution made the reproach to my studies on Shi'ite theology not to have chosen a subject of political or social relevance but something totally irrelevant to the requirements of the students' revolutionary understanding of modern universities. Less than a decade afterwards, my studies were most welcome because they provided information about Shi'ism and what kind of Islam it is. The lesson from that is that in order to respond to religions on demand one must be allowed to study religions for themselves, without an obvious purpose of immediately noticeable relevance so that in case of further unforeseeable needs the discipline is able to offer its results when the moment has come.

The Khomeiny effect soon had parallels in other parts of the Muslim world. In Egypt the Muslim brotherhood tried unsuccessfully to fight against the government and its support from the West. Here again, more academic attention was then paid to Islamist movements whereas before, the study interests concentrated on liberal Islamic thinking hoping that this would finally be successful in the Muslim world. The shift in studies from liberal to Islamist thinking, however, led to a nearly complete neglect of what liberal Muslims discuss so that the study interests nowadays run the risk to be as one-sided as they were before, because neither covers the whole truth of a well balanced description. In Algeria, a new type of Islamic revolution (Front Islamique du Salut = FIS) undermined the country's security from the late 1980s onwards. It attacked the government backed up by France and tried to establish Islamic rule instead. A political

intervention on behalf of the French government set an end to the elections of 1991 and thus hindered the FIS from taking power in Algeria. As a consequence of that, a long fight went on and led to thousands of dead in a civil war with countless terrorist attacks against policemen and state institutions. Needless to add that the political struggle of the FIS had its effect on the study of Islam, too.

The list of attacks in the name of Islam, alone, would be long enough to make a whole book of it. It could range from purely political acts of power taking place in specific countries such as the establishment of Islamic rule under the Taliban in Afghanistan via eventual acts of anger such as the reactions to Danish Muhammad cartoons in 2006 or to Pope Benedict XVI's lecture in Regensburg of 2006 up to pure terrorist acts culminating in the destruction of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. No doubt that Islam is *the* example to show the political relevance of religion in the world of today. The Study of Religions can use it always to underline the importance of its contribution to political and social sciences. Here the competence in interpreting theological language and thought is needed, and this is something what scholars of religions are qualified for as neither political or social sciences nor Oriental languages skills are sufficient to do this type of studies alone. They need competent interpretation on behalf of the Study of Religions in order to provide a complete spectrum of the aspects involved.

A concentration on Islam alone, however, would narrow the political scenario with reference to the increasing importance of religion in recent years.¹ Judaism and Christianity, too, have fundamentalist groups which offer apocalyptic interpretations of world politics. It is noteworthy in this respect that the Hizbollah bombs' attacks against Haifa during the war of 2006 between Israel and her enemies in South Lebanon were interpreted as the battle of Armageddon described in the last book of the New Testament. Moreover, religion was more and more seen as Israel's fights against Hizbollah and Hamas so that it became a confrontation between Jews and Muslims instead of, as before, between Israelis and Palestinians (including Arab Christians as well). The lack of knowledge regarding Jewish and Christian apocalyptic visions of the conflicts in the Middle East leads to one-sided interpretations of Bin Laden's response to them in Wes-

1 Mark Juergensmeyer gave an excellent and systematic survey of the importance of religions for present-day politics, continent by continent (Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press 2008).

tern media.² A complete understanding of the struggle between the different groups would require that both, Judeo-Christian fundamentalist thought and Islamic extremist positions, form together the whole mosaic of the political puzzle which combines religious interpretations and political events in a way which is hardly understandable to secular thinking that is so typical of politics in Western Europe.

Religion plays an important role also in the changes which take place in the Americas. It is noteworthy that American Pentecostals are more and more successful in their missionary activities in Middle and South America so that this traditionally Roman Catholic continent is more and more influenced by Protestant thought. On the contrary, through migration from Middle and South America to the USA, the number of Roman Catholics has considerably increased so that Catholicism has become a significant element of the USA religious landscape as the Pope's visit to the United States has made clear in 2008.

With regard to Catholicism it is still unclear which impact on international politics and in particular for the changes within the Communist block in the 1980s the election of the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in 1978 had. The Study of Religions in Europe unfortunately has so far had too much interest in Christian minority groups and has drawn too little attention to mainstream churches such as the Roman Catholic Church or the major Protestant Churches. Since all of these are important factors in world politics today such a neglect cannot be tolerated any longer and should be replaced with more serious studies from the point of view of the Study of Religions instead of leaving the field of research to Christian theologians alone. Pope Benedict XVI indicated the role of the Roman Catholic Church in a speech addressed to Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Republic of Italy on November 20, 2006, when he said that the Roman Catholic Church will "neither be a political agent nor silent" ("*né agente politico né silente*"). What this means in concreto, needs to be studied in detail, not only with regard to Italy but to other countries as well.

The concentration on monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) so far does not mean that other religions would not play a role in politics as well. Although Hindu fundamentalists in India were less successful than their Muslim neighbours in Pakistan and Bangladesh, they were not less active. In certain states of India they are very strong and support the idea that all who are born in India are Hindus whatever religion they officially might belong to. Moreover, all kinds of missionary activities as

2 Cf. for that Elmar Theveßen, "Sprengstoff Gott: Die Aktualität politischer Theologien", in: Gregor Maria Hoff (ed.), *Gott im Kommen: Salzburger Hochschulwochen 2006*, Innsbruck – Wien: Tyrolia 2006, 130-145.

well as all conversions should, according to Hindu fundamentalists, be legally forbidden in order to maintain Hinduism as the only true religion of India. Although Hindus failed in taking official power in India the wish to achieve this aim is still present in many minds and inspires a lot of political activities in the country.

Buddhism, too, is active in politics. This was noticed during the Dalai Lama's visit to Germany in 2008 when the Chinese government interpreted the Dalai Lama's good will tour as a direct interference into internal affairs of China a few months before the opening of the Olympic games in Beijing. In a similar way the Buddhist monks of Myanmar (Burma) gave voice to the voiceless in their suffering and grief as a consequence of political suppression, hunger and earthquake catastrophes in 2008. Public attention was thus drawn to Burmese Buddhism so that even study projects could then successfully be applied for while before, those areas of studies were as unknown and strange as Shi'ism before the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

These few examples may suffice to underline the importance of the Study of Religions for the present political scenario. Need is to emphasize that in many countries religions express the aspirations and hopes of people under certain political, social and economic circumstances. The Study of Religions must therefore pay great attention to what is going on and being thought in these areas in order to provide information if it is on demand. The Study of Religions should not wait until the subject has already revealed its political impact through concrete actions, it should hold information about religions on stock like books on demand are always ready to be printed.

Signs of hope II: The field of historical research

The mapping of the role of religion in current politics is an important task for the Study of Religions. Another one is the field of historical research. Two examples from the Middle East area may suffice to underline that: the study of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the conception of Judaism and Christianity as heirs of the religion of Ancient Israel.

The study of the life of the Prophet Muhammad was over more than 70 years almost at the same status of knowledge. Nearly all the scholars of Islam repeated what Muslim sources told them. Consequently, there was a gap between the details concerning the Prophet Muhammad's life as reported in the Koran and the respective passages in the *hadith* literature. It seemed that two different versions circulated without any reconciliation possible. Islamic studies based on Arabic source material could not give an

answer to the open questions. The way out of the crisis, as described by Tilman Nagel,³ is a closer look at the whole history of religions in pre-Muhammadan Arabia. The new insights are based on extensive readings of Jewish and Christian sources that help to cast light on the Koranic surahs. In this respect one author has gained new importance: Heinrich Speyer⁴ who published his studies on biblical narratives in the Koran in 1931 and was since nearly forgotten in spite of reprints of his book in later times. He is of great actuality nowadays because of the change in study interests pointed out by Nagel. Moreover, the Christian author Sozomenos⁵ is of great importance, too, when he reports in his church history that a sanctuary in Mamre served worshippers from different cults as a holy place in the 5th century A.D., tracing its origin back to Abraham. With reference to the sanctuary of Mamre Tilman Nagel as well as Bertram Schmitz conclude that the Kaaba of Mecca originally had the same significance so that here again a pre-Islamic sanctuary said to be founded by Abraham may have been used by worshippers of different cults. Thanks to extensive readings of the Talmud Schmitz can show how often the Koran quotes Jewish sources correctly where for a long time interpreters thought them incorrect.⁶

Only the comparative reading of source material from different religious traditions, consequently, offers a complete mosaic to the attentive scholar in the field of the Study of Religions. This holistic view of a certain period cannot be replaced by a series of specific individual approaches although these are needed to provide the material for such syntheses.

Bertram Schmitz has also shown the relevance of the holistic approach in one more field: the conception of Judaism and Christianity as heirs of the religion of Ancient Israel. In his book on how the religion of Ancient Israel was carried on in the formations of Judaism and Early Christianity⁷ he elucidates that a split of the different functions of the ancient religion took place after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Thus both Judaism and Christianity were authentic followers of this religion in adopting and continuing different functions of the previous religious message: Judaism concentrated on the respect of the rules of behaviour, conti-

3 Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, München: R. Oldenbourg 2008, in particular 835-852.

4 Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms 1988 (a reprint of the edition of 1931).

5 Cf. T. Nagel, *Mohammed...*, 847.

6 Bertram Schmitz, *Der Koran: Sure 2 „Die Kuh“*. *Ein religionshistorischer Kommentar*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009.

7 Bertram Schmitz, *Vom Tempelkult zur Eucharistiefeyer: Die Transformation eines Zentralsymbols aus religionswissenschaftlicher Sicht*, (Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 38), Berlin: LIT 2006.

nued to read the Bible in its original Hebrew version, relied on synagogical religious services with no clergy, thus making of Judaism an ethnic lay people religion of Semitic tradition without any missionary activities; Christianity, on the contrary, integrated the temple cult of Ancient Israel into its hierarchical priesthood system with the Eucharist as an unbloody sacrifice of the Yom Kippur; it propagated its religion through missionary activities trying to win followers in all nations, using Greek as the language for sermons and masses as well as for the Bible. The result of Schmitz' study is that Judaism and Christianity have each continued authentic parts of the religious tradition of Ancient Israel in forming two different religions out of it with specific characteristics which were as such partly studied in each of these traditions but not yet brought together in an overall survey of synthesis.

The comparative perspective justifies the Study of Religions' approach as an offer of a holistic view in the world of specialists. It gives new inspiration to smaller fields of specialization in the universities. Therefore, the Study of Religions lives in a time of hope and should be fully aware of that among the specialists. It should overcome the time of decline and defend its duties with pride.

The two examples mentioned could easily be multiplied with others from other times and areas. The two were given here to encourage holistic approaches and comparative studies even if an immediate application may not always be in sight. In the case of Heinrich Speyer many more years were needed to make his research applicable than in the case of Shi'ite theology.⁸

Signs of hope III: The theory field

The Study of Religions has two main concerns: one is to provide information and to accumulate knowledge in the field of specific religions; the other is to offer theoretical frames for interpretation. Often it seems that the two have little in common with each other.

Three examples for the latter will explain what such an enterprise implies: the Phenomenology of Religion, secularism and World History. They will show to what an extent the former can serve although those studies are often not done with the intention to fulfil such a task.

⁸ This can happen in Natural Sciences too, though more rarely. So more than 70 years were needed until the official scientific recognition of the laws of the inheritance of traits in pea plants as worked out in the non accepted doctoral thesis of Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884), an Augustine priest and scientist in an abbey of Brno who is now called "the father of modern genetics".

First, the Phenomenology of Religion. Annemarie Schimmel's Gifford lectures, published as *Deciphering the Signs of God* in 1994,⁹ are an introduction to Islam as a religion as well as a civilization according to the systematisation and categories of classical Phenomenology of Religion. Schimmel dedicated the book to her dearly loved professor and admired master Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967) who developed a system, in his book entitled *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* ("Manifestations and Essence of Religion"),¹⁰ to systematize and catalogue the enormous amount of data collected all over the various religions. His suggestion was to classify the data by speaking of holy objects, holy spaces, times and numbers, holy actions, holy words and scriptures, holy persons and communities, religious ideas and religious experience. Annemarie Schimmel used these categories to describe Islam in these terms by giving numerous examples which highlight the various aspects of these topics. Her vast knowledge of Islam allowed her to show that all this can be found in Islam. In nature as well as in culture there are so many signs of God that the reference to the holy text of the Koran becomes only one facet of a multifaceted reality called Islam. In particular the rich world of Islamic mysticism offers many examples which show that dogmas or principles cover a small sector only if compared with what is unfolded in this phenomenological approach. Nearly everything can become a sign of God if deciphered in the right way of understanding religion. No need to say that such a comprehensive view of Islam is based on life long readings of all kinds of Muslim texts. It is the ripe fruit of life long learning about Islam and not a specific study in terms of a publication project. It is thus somehow itself what the Muslim mystics (sufis) describe, with reference to nature and culture, as *ishārāt*, i.e. hidden indications or signs of God even if for uninstructed people they don't look like that.

Second example is that of secularism. The debate on secularism in the USA expresses doubts that religion will end with modernity. It is thus opposed to what many intellectuals in Europe believed during the 20th century, namely that modern thinking in natural sciences and technology will lead to an atheist *Weltanschauung* where religion appears as the remains of superstition and irrational thought. The more modern thinking is in progress world-wide – that was the expectation – the more religion will be in decline and lose its normative function. It would be replaced with science. Yet, the predictions of the definite end of religion failed. The break down

9 Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1994.

10 Friedrich Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, (Die Religionen der Menschheit 1), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer [1961].

of the Communist block at the end of the 20th century has shown that religion is still alive in spite of all attempts of intensive atheist education. In 1991 I saw a poster in one of the big newspaper agencies of Taschkent (nowadays Uzbekistan) where an atheist bowed before a Mullah. The atheist had a handbag in his hand out of which fell papers with plans for atheist education. Such plans had no positive results: Islam survived. What was herewith indicated in the last year of the existence of the Soviet Union had its parallels everywhere in the Communist world under Soviet rule. Ten years later, Jürgen Habermas discussed the problem in his speech for the peace award ceremony of the German publishers.¹¹ Under the impression of September 11, 2001 he did not speak about modern technology as originally planned but about belief and reason admitting that modernity left many hopes unanswered which religion seems to be able to address. Yet, Habermas' arguments can still be read in one line with the secular discourse which now reached – as Habermas put it – the stage of a post-secular society so that a lot of the former arguments remained still valuable. In contradiction with that, the Verlag der Weltreligionen within the Insel publishers, mainly following left wing thinking so far, is now editing a series of texts of world religions in order to underline the change of perspectives which has taken place world-wide. For Harvey Cox¹² secularisation is not the dominant interpretation pattern anymore since Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and last but not least Judaism and Christianity have come back to the political floor and need to be taken as elements for future analyses of politics. Peter Berger follows the same line of argumentation, though making an eventual exception for Western Europe.¹³ At least as far as Germany is concerned, there is no reason to believe that religion will be predominant in terms of adherence to religious communities.¹⁴ Recent statistics¹⁵ show that over the years from 1950 up to 2003 adherence to the main Christian Churches (Roman Catholic and Protestant) suffered from a considerable decrease over the last decades while the number of people without any confession/religion was in steady increase so that in

11 Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002.

12 Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century: The Rise and Fall of Secularization", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27, 2000, 1-13.

13 Cf. Peter Berger, "Secularization and De-Secularization", in: Linda Woodhead et al. (eds.), *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformation*, London – New York: Routledge 2002, 291-298, and id., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center – Green Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans 1999.

14 Cf. for that Hartmut Lehmann, *Säkularisierung: Der europäische Sonderweg in Sachen Religion*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2004.

15 Cf. <<http://www.fowid.de>> [25 September 2009].

2003, 31.3 % of the Germans declared themselves to be Roman Catholics and the same percentage applied to the Protestants while those without any confessional, i.e. religious ties reached 31.8 %. Moslems had a score of 3.9 % and others were 1.7 %. This shows that fears about Germany becoming a Muslim country are not justified nor that secularisation will be ended soon if that means religious instead of non-religious people.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is a certain return of the sacred among natural scientists, technicians and medical doctors who do not seem to be very much affected by any scientific *Weltanschauung* but seriously want more room for religious thoughts along with their own scientific convictions. It is noteworthy in this context that in 2007 the Minister of Education in the German state of Hessen suggested to have both, evolution and creationism, as subjects in the biology school curriculum, not in religious education, and the Protestant Church of Germany issued a statement in 2008 to respond to creationism from a theological perspective. Charismatic Pentecostals argue against modern Christian exegesis saying that it got trapped by certain presuppositions of laws for nature so that there is no belief in biblical miracles anymore. They insist instead on having a more biblical than a modern theology. All this shows that secularisation is challenged world-wide, and in particular in Western Europe. All the different arguments, however, which are put forward in favour of the near end of secularisation as well as those for its continued existence, do not suffice to predict the future in either direction with certainty. There are enough arguments to leave the future open to eventual changes. To believe that modern thinking and in particular modern natural sciences and technology will automatically call for an end of religion cannot be maintained any longer whatever the concrete developments will be world-wide or in Western Europe. The Study of Religions must therefore follow very attentively the debate in order to provide enough information for the moment when there is a demand for it.

The third example is that of the current debate in many Departments of History concerning World History as a project. Obviously, many of the Departments feel that the syllabus in use so far does not respond to the needs of world-wide perspectives because it was and still is too limited to the interests of certain areas. In this respect, the Study of Religions has a lot to offer because, for a long time, it has had such a global perspective and has collected material to respond to these needs. Scholars of the discipline should therefore seek collaboration with colleagues from the History Departments if they do not do so already. The Study of Religions as a discip-

16 Cf. Peter Antes, "Religioso e non religioso nella Germania contemporanea", in: Paolo Corvo – Raúl Enríquez Valencia (eds.), *Babele e dintorni: Fra catastrofismi e nuovi percorsi di senso*, Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa 2008, 199-207.

line is indeed able to offer its collaboration not only for global perspectives as done in Phenomenology of Religion but also with regard to specific religions which cover large areas of the globe or remote zones. The material collected and held on stock in the archives of the discipline is worth being offered as a positive response to the demands of other disciplines.

Signs of Decline

This positive perspective saying that the Study of Religions lives in a time of hope cannot, however, overlook signs of decline. The hopeful signs regarding the urgent need of information coexist with a number of challenges that come from both external as well as internal problems.

Lets begin by external problems. The professional future is unclear for those who have finished their Bachelor and Master degrees as well as their PhDs if they do not want to continue their careers in the university. Though there is an increasing need of information regarding religions and religion, this need does not correspond to the number of jobs offered on the market. Still there are no consultants established for religious pluralism in administration and industry. Consequently, there is more demand than working perspectives to answer to it.

Even within the university the future is not brilliant even for the brightest of the discipline. The financial policies in the universities often lead to cuts in the Humanities and support the Natural and Technical Sciences instead. Moreover, the assumption that the time of religion would soon be over weakens the position of the Study of Religions within the Humanities and makes it suffer more than other disciplines if jobs and resources must be reduced.

The Bologna process for the reforms of studies is a challenge to “small disciplines”. It favours large teaching and research units. It threatens the existence of discipline with only a few staff members.

Finally, the need to find money for research has an effect on what is researched. Foundations and other research funds give guidelines which indicate what is likely to be financed and thus orientate research in certain directions while free research is hardly appreciated because of ranking lists which measure the importance of research in terms of sums granted. Shi‘ism and Burmese Buddhism are striking examples to show how counterproductive it may be if research funds are the only criteria for research.

Besides external problems there are internal ones as well. For a long time, the Study of Religions was concerned with a clear distinction from Theology in many European countries. A lot of work went into this deba-

te and was lost for providing “objective”, i.e. intersubjectively controllable information about religion and religions.

Still in this line, a long debate went on to clarify the methodology for the Study of Religions. Yet, often this debate had not led to positive results inside but shed a negative light on the discipline in the eyes of outsiders who dealt with similar problems without having apparently the same requirements for their own research.

At a time when religion has moved from the margins to the centre of interest in society the danger is that the contents of the Study of Religions may be picked up by other disciplines with other competences while the Study of Religions is too much concerned with itself and thus not sufficiently aware of its own competence as a valid contribution.

Conclusion

The previous paragraphs have shown an increasing interest in religion in different academic fields. The political scenario was mentioned as well as the field of historical research and the theory field. For all these the Study of Religions has a lot to offer. It is in particular its comparative and global perspective which make the contributions of the Study of Religions so helpful to the other disciplines and unique in its approach. What has been collected can be offered on demand. And therefore, the conclusion of these reflections is that the present situation is a time of hope for the Study of Religions. Never since World War II has the demand for the Study of Religions been so great as today. Therefore hope should prevail and help to overcome the challenges that suggest a time of decline. The moment has come to say that the Study of Religions makes an important contribution to the scientific, cultural and political debate.



SUMMARY

The Study of Religions on Demand

The paper states that the Study of Religions is in a time of hope. Examples from the political scenario, from the field of historical research and from the theory field show what the Study of Religions has to offer to other disciplines in search for more comparative and global competence which is already realized in the Study of Religions and has led to a unique collection of material held on stock for being used on demand. It also mentions the challenges that exist for the Study of Religions both outside and inside the discipline but argues that the Study of Religions makes an important contribution to the scientific, cultural and political debate.

RÉSUMÉ

Poptávka po religionistice

Tato studie zastává názor, že se religionistika nachází v období naděje. Příklady z politického vývoje, historického výzkumu i z oblasti teorie ukazují, že religionistika má co nabídnout jiným oborům při hledání důsledněji srovnávací a globální perspektivy, která je v religionistice již skutečností. Tato perspektiva umožnila vytvoření jedinečného souboru materiálu, jenž může být použit, kdykoli po něm vznikne poptávka. Studie se také zmiňuje o vnitřních i vnějších problémech religionistiky, ale uzavírá, že religionistika představuje významný přínos pro vědecké, kulturní i politické diskuse.

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