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The Study of the Past and its Present Challenges in the Study of Religions

The article comments on the three challenges, which Mattias Brand presents in the Introduction: the questioning of central concepts, multiplication and fragmentation, and communication with a large audience. It also comments on Nickolas P. Roubekas article, “Asking Old Questions Anew: On the History of Religions.” The author stresses the lack of stability in the concept of religion and that those definitions must be modified and refined. A realistic goal for historians of religion is to a higher degree to contribute to middle-range theories where theories and empirical research are more closely integrated. Since religions of the past make up a significant part of the religion/s that have ever existed, they are essential to include in a comparative study of religion. The author finally points out that successful theorising in the historical study of religion should include students.

Introduction

Mattias Brand has written a thoughtful introduction to a persistent problem.¹ He notes that there has been an anthropological turn in the Study of Religion, which has favoured sociological questions and approaches, and that historical studies have become more marginal. He asks: “What is, therefore, the added value of historical work within a discipline like the Study of Religion/s? What is the role of historians in the growing diversity of research methods, questions, and communities?”² Brand aptly stresses that we belong to an “academic discipline with shared cultural, social, institutional, organizational, and pedagogical aspects,” and he invites us “to re-think the role of the historians and historical analysis in the Study of religion/s,” and to “take up the challenge to think about ‘a genuine dialogue’ between historians and the social theory they draw upon.” Brand quotes W. H. Sewell jr., “the historians rarely speak back” and suggests “to explore how historians of religion ‘speak

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1. Brand, “Introduction” (this issue).
2. Brand, “Introduction,” 618 (this issue).

back' through research practices such as historicising, comparing, theorising, and generalisation."³ Brand presents three challenges to the historical study of religion: the questioning of central concepts; multiplication and fragmentation; and communication with a large audience.⁴

In this paper, I will comment on these challenges and on Nickolas P. Roubekas' article, "Asking Old Questions Anew: On the History of Religions," which responds constructively to them.

Applicating the Concept of "Religion" on the Past

In the Study of Religion, the concept of religion has changed from being regarded as self-explanatory, and even *sui generis*, to being recreated as an analytical concept. The concept's legitimacy and analytical value have repeatedly been questioned.⁵ Timothy Fitzgerald found it analytically useless, and moved on to deconstruct other Western categories, such as "politics," "culture," "nature," and "history."⁶ His contributions fuelled the debate and strengthened the impulse to define and redefine religion as an analytical concept.⁷ Brand's first challenge connects to this discussion and to the application of the term "religion" for patterns in ancient societies.

"There is no religion in the Bible," says Naomi R. Goldenberg, because "religion" "designating distinct phenomena or institutions is alien to the Bible."⁸ Her words illustrate the need to define what we are looking for. According to Roubekas, "without a definition scholars can hardly justify that they have an actual domain that they study."⁹ He discusses Hesiod's works, the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and asks, is Hesiod talking about religion? Referring to Melford Spiro's definition, Roubekas points out that if religion "is 'consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings,' then Hesiod is the quintessential religious source for the historians of religion who work on ancient Greek religious ideas and

3. Brand, "Introduction," 621 (this issue).

4. Brand, "Introduction," 622 (this issue).

5. Jonathan Z. Smith's dictum in his book, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), xi, is frequently referred to in the discussions: "There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purpose by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy."

6. T. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); T. Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

7. In "The Historicization of 'Religion' and the Devastation of Study of Religion Departments: Siamese Twins or Contingent Acquaintances?" *Implicit Religion* 22, no. 3–4 (2019): 291–308, Teemu Taira divides the reception of Fitzgerald's first book into four types of reactions and response: total rejection; a slightly more positive response but with no wish to make significant changes in scholarly approaches to the field; more engaged responses, which realise that the term poses problems; and the fourth response, which agrees with Fitzgerald and wants to take the implications of his critic seriously, 293–94. According to Kevin Schilbrack, the critiques of the use of religion has three levels, "religion" is a social construction, it distorts one's perception of the reality it seeks to name, and it is ideological poisonous, in "Religions: Are There Any?" *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112–38.

8. N. R. Goldenberg, "There is no religion in the Bible." *Implicit Religion* 22, no. 1 (2019), 13.

9. Roubekas, 635 (this issue).

practices.”¹⁰ In the last part of his article, Roubekas concludes that “Hesiod’s discourse can only be described as a religious one if a proper definition of religion has been employed.”¹¹ Roubekas chooses a definition, one of many, which includes interaction with superhuman beings. His contribution illustrates why a definition is important and what it accomplishes.

Roubekas mentions the study of gender, racism, social stratification, and power relations as themes that are interesting to study in the past, themes that are inspired by the present. These themes illuminate the past, at the same time as they throw light on contemporary issues. However, when Roubekas encourages scholars to “leave outside their research their own ideological or other political or politically-informed agendas that could eventually cause more harm than benefit to their inquiries,”¹² it is reason to question his demand. It is not always possible, or even perhaps optimal, to leave one’s agendas completely behind, because they are frequently the original inspiration to pose new questions to old sources. Such agendas may contribute to see ancient sources in a new light. The hermeneutic challenge is, as always, to be self-reflexive, retain a critical view on one’s prejudices, and be explicit about one’s agendas.

Roubekas shows that it is possible to find a parallel in ancient cultures to what is today labelled religion. In a similar way, Mattias Brand points to the Manichaean case and says that it “has shown remarkably consistent images and concepts analogous to a modern understanding of religions.”¹³ Alan Lenzi’s recent study of how Mesopotamian scholars in the first millennium BCE treated ritual speech, especially incantations, shows that the ritual specialists labelled and organised ritual speech in a way, which suggests that they had similar ideas about the category of divine-human relationships as those which are present in the modern concept of religion.¹⁴ It demonstrates that religion could sometimes be theorised in ancient cultures without having a concept of religion.

Such attempts to find analogue patterns in ancient cultures is labelled “critical realism” by Kevin Schilbrack.¹⁵ He presents a choice between two critical approaches to religion, “a critical nonrealism that argues that nothing like what modern people call religion existed in antiquity, and a critical realism that says that something like what modern people call religion did.” This “critical realism” “means that the concepts one imagines as realities in the past may fit the word more or less accurately.”

“More or less accurately” is a point. It must also be noted that the commonly used and non-theorised concept of religion is not stable. A narrow

10. Roubekas, 637 (this issue).

11. Roubekas, 640 (this issue).

12. Roubekas, 639 (this issue).

13. Brand, “Cross-Cultural Generalisation,” 659 (this issue).

14. A. Lenzi, “Ancient Mesopotamian Scholars, Ritual Speech, and Theorizing Religion Without ‘Theory’ or ‘Religion,’” in *Theorizing ‘Religion’ in Antiquity*, ed. N. P. Roubekas. (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 154–75. Giovanni Casadio makes a forceful case for the existence of religions in ancient cultures in “Historicizing and Translating Religion,” in *The Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Stausberg and S. Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33–51.

15. K. Schilbrack, “Theorizing ‘Religion’ in Antiquity: A How To,” in *Theorizing ‘Religion’ in Antiquity*, ed. N. P. Roubekas (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 76.

Christian-Protestant conception has in the last decenniums been supplemented by other conceptions, and in some cases by more global comprehensions of religion.¹⁶ The scholarly concept of religion also changes, due to reflexive and self-reflexive attitudes of scholars.¹⁷ Historians of religion, who feel the need to refine scholarly concepts, contribute to the process of creating better and more inclusive concepts, and it is reasonable to think that definitions of religion are modified when they are reflexively applied to ancient patterns of beliefs and practices.¹⁸ So it is not only a question about how definitions fit, but how they are modified.

Concepts function as *tertium comparationis*. Wouter Hanegraaff presents “religion” as a “pre-comparative *tertium*,” which has enabled and enables comparison between familiar and unfamiliar forms of belief and worship, both as historical and cross-cultural comparisons.¹⁹ According to Oliver Freiberger, to see the *tertium comparationis*, “as a heuristic and dynamic category that not only defines the point in which the comparands are compared but also is modified and refined by the particularities that each comparand brings to the comparison, seems most productive.”²⁰ This implies that a

16. In “What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014): 246–86, Michael Bergunder discusses what he describes as “Religion 1” and “Religion 2.”: “The ‘explained’ Religion 1 is to be found in the explicit definitions of religion in the field of religious studies and related academic disciplines. The ‘unexplained’ Religion 2, on the other hand, is a contemporary everyday understanding of religion,” 252. About the emergence of the category of religion and earlier paradigms of study, see T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), and C. Bell, “Paradigms behind (and before) the Modern Concept of Religion.” *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 45 (2006): 27–46.

17. See O. Krüger, “From an Aristotelian *Ordo Essendi* to Relation: Shifting Paradigms in the Study of Religions in the Light of the Sociology of Knowledge.” *Numen* 69 (2022): 61–96. Krüger elaborated on the relational aspects in the study of religion. He points to approaches, which are built on aspects of human interaction, communication, and reciprocal relationships, and speaks about a paradigm shift (à la Thomas Kuhn) and a new paradigm in the study of religion, which he calls “a relational paradigm.” In a relational paradigm, the question is not so much what religion is, but rather what religion *does*, as Brand points out in “Cross-Cultural Generalisation,” 655–56. Katja Rakow has expressed it well: “Religion is not an essentialist category, but a relational phenomenon, which makes it rather unproductive to state anything general about the genus ‘religion’, because the term does not refer to a stable referent, but to contingent and changing formulations,” in “On Bogeymen and The Promises of the Past or How to Construct a Uniform Identity: A Response to Markus Davidsen.” *Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2020): 259 – also quoted by Brand, “Cross-Cultural Generalisation,” 665.

18. According to John North, ancient Romans categorised separately areas which are today regarded as part of a single complex tradition, “theology was generally seen as part of philosophy having little to do with priests, diviners, or rituals; religiosity; another word for which there is no Latin equivalent, belonged with myth and poetry; while spiritual support and comfort would have seemed part of family or city life, or perhaps belonging in the sphere of clubs and associations.” In “The Religious History of the Roman Empire,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.114>, (accessed March 2, 2022).

19. Hanegraaff asks, if “we try to conceptualize or define ‘religion,’ then *what kind of entity are we talking about, and where is such an entity located.*” In “Reconstruction ‘Religion’ from the Bottom Up.” *Numen* 63 (2016): 578. This is a valuable contribution to the debate about how the concept of “religion” can be reconstructed. He understands “religion” as an imaginative formation, and stresses that “*it is precisely by means of reification that imaginary constructs become real and potent forces in the actual world.*” 580. (The italics are in Hanegraaff’s article).

20. O. Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107.

scholarly concept of “religion” is influenced and modified by historical studies as well as by the everyday use of the concept.

It does not seem possible to build the identity of the Study of Religion on a unifying concept of religion, because we do not (and probably never will) agree on how religion should be defined. This lack of agreement does not mean that it is not fruitful to try to define the object of study. Even if discussions about the concept of religion sometimes develop into navel-gazing, ongoing discussions about concepts is probably the best we have when it comes to create a common identity, which connects scholars with different specialisations. Historians of religion should contribute more actively and explicitly to these discussions by including research on historical religions as inputs for a definition and in this way take part in the further development of the discipline. Roubekas is right when he stresses that “Historians of Religion, therefore, need to formulate and advance their own definition in order to demarcate their subject matter.”²¹

Multiplication, Fragmentation, and Hyperspecialisation

Brand’s second challenge is “the fragmentation of the discipline.” He points to “the complicated relationship between the plurality of its subject and its generalizing theoretical ambitions”²² and asks: “Where do our stories about the past come together on a higher level of abstraction, bridging the gap between very particular religions and historical settings?”²³

It should first be noted that the “fragmentation of the discipline” can easily be read as a success story. The discipline was born in the shadow of theology and has developed into a global study of all religion(s), past and present with a growth in generalist and specialist journals, handbooks, and conferences.²⁴ This development reflects that religion is a complex phenomenon with many aspects. Its study applies various theoretical perspectives and different methods, and continually turns to new sources and themes. This, however, is not evidence of a lack of disciplinary identity, but rather of a complex identity — a natural result of studying the complexity of that which is labelled “religion.”²⁵ It seems like the development of the Study of Religion has made historical approaches become more marginal. In what ways should historians of religion take part in the development of the discipline?

International handbooks have, for instance, been criticised for only to a small degree including examples from historical religions.²⁶ An analysis of

21. Roubekas, 635 (this issue).

22. Brand, “Introduction,” 618 (this issue).

23. Brand, “Introduction,” 625 (this issue).

24. According to Michael Stausberg, “the development of journals evidences accelerated growth and diversification of publication activities.” “History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Stausberg and S. Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 775. For a critical evaluation of the discipline and its intellectual limitations, see 793–4 in Stausberg’s article.

25. I. S. Gilhus, “Founding Fathers, Turtles and the Elephant in the Room: The Quest for Origins in the Scientific Study of Religion.” *Temenos* 50, no. 2 (2014): 209.

26. Brand, “Introduction,” 618 (this issue).

four companions and field-guides in English, published between 1998 and 2006, reveals that, despite superhuman beings being part of frequently used definitions of religion, only one of these handbooks had an entry on them (God).²⁷ Such beings seem to have a marginal position or have vanished, even in the indices to these books. One characteristic of ancient religions is that they include a plurality of superhuman beings, so these handbooks do very little to accommodate this aspect of religions. A combination of social science approaches, a conception of religion strongly influenced by Western monotheistic religion (the conception of God has one entry in one of the handbooks), and the marginality of historical perspectives cause this one-sidedness.²⁸

Two recent handbooks, one on research methods and one on the study of religion, both edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, include sub-chapters on history and historical approaches,²⁹ and “history” has got many lines and references in the index of *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*.³⁰ However, in the index of *The Routledge Handbooks of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, Christianity has thirty one lines, Judaism nine lines, Islam six lines, Buddhism four lines, Hinduism three lines, Greek religion one line, Roman religion one line, while Egyptian religion and Mesopotamian religion are not referred to in the index. This shows both that the historical aspect is present and theorised in these hand-book approaches to the Study of Religion at the same time as there is still a one-sidedness in where examples are taken from in a study which has the ambitions of being global and comparative.

Stausberg and Engler have recently made a summary of the situation of the Study of Religion, which is relevant for historical studies of religion:³¹ Most scholars study “one religion, one period, or one region, either ethnographically or historically, and some in both ways.”³² The authors claim that “grand theory is in demand because it provides a view of the forest, whereas scholars of religion tend to concern themselves with trees.” They point out that scholars tend not to use their research to build broader theories of religion, such theories are instead created by “scholars working in disciplines that have stronger traditions

27. I. S. Gilhus, “What Became of Superhuman Beings? Companions and Field Guides in the Study of Religion,” in *Contemporary Views on Comparative Religion*, ed. P. Antes, A. W. Geertz, and M. Rothstein (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016), 375–87. W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon, ed., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000); J. R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge); R. A. Segal, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); M.C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); F. S. Fiorenza and G.D. Kaufman, “God.” In *Critical terms for Religious Studies*, 136–59.

28. Fiorenza and Kaufman, “God,” (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

29. J. Rüpke, “History,” in *The Routledge Handbooks of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge 2011), 285–309; E. Thomassen, “Philology,” in *The Routledge Handbook*, 346–54; A. Williams, “Translation,” in *The Routledge Handbook*, 421–32; G. Casadio, “Historizing and Translating Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33–51.

30. *The Oxford Handbook*, 836.

31. “Theories of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook*, 66.

32. “Theories,” 66.

of generalization.”³³ As exceptions to the general tendency, they mention Thomas A. Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling* (2006), Manuel A. Vásquez’s *More than Belief* (2011), and Robert Bellah’s *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) — contributions, which have attracted much attention. Among them, Bellah, who was a sociologist, not a historian of religion, includes ancient history in his grand theory about evolution and the axial age. Walter Burkert, who was a world-leading specialist in Greek religion, combines human biological and cultural development in his grand theory about the origin of religion.³⁴

These are rare examples of the theoretical boldness, which has been asked for. However, there is perhaps a limit to how many grand theories and abstract generalisations a discipline need. For most scholars of the Study of Religion, a more realistic goal than constructing grand theory is to create middle-range theories where theory and empirical research are more closely integrated. To such theories, historians of religions should to a higher degree contribute. Brands’s recipe of “historizing, comparing, and theorizing” is worth noting and needs to be followed up.³⁵

Why is historical research important? There are several reasons: one is the persistent need to rewrite history. History needs to be rewritten because theoretical approaches and contemporary interests change. The narrative about ancient Roman religion went from a rather one-sided story about empty rituals and lack of belief to a much more nuanced narrative. Concepts guide research in certain directions. In a recent criticism of the conception of “ancient Christian communities,” Sarah E. Rollens argues, for instance, against the tendency to see doctrinal differences in early Christian texts as corresponding to separate communities. She finds them to be sociologically ambiguous and a result of Protestant theology.³⁶ Some concepts distort the image of how things were. Christian discourse on heresy, inherited by Church History, made the so-called “Gnostics” into arch-heretics and Gnosticism into a heretical religious movement. “Heresy” and “orthodoxy” are used as polemical terms, the views of later times are written into the past, and the rewritten past is made to fit the religious present. Recent research has shown a different picture, that the Nag Hammadi codices, the so-called Gnostic texts, were most likely copied, and read by Christian monks.³⁷ David Robertson has written a history of the formation of the concept of “Gnosticism” in scholarship and about the connection between Gnosticism, as a category in religious studies and the “History of Religions” school.³⁸ His study throws

33. “Theories,” 66.

34. W. Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

35. “The Historical and Comparative Study,” 1 ff. See also P. van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison* (New York: Duke University Press, 2016).

36. S. Rollens, “The Anachronism of ‘Early Christian Communities,’ in *Theorizing ‘Religion’ in Antiquity*, in N. P. Roubekas, ed. (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019): 307–24.

37. H. Lundhaug and L. Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 97) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

38. D. R. Robertson, *Gnosticism and the Study of Religions* (Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiries and Explanations) (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

light over how the category was essentialised into a *sui generis* and universal category in the History of Religions. Such case studies are much needed in a rewriting of history.

Roubekas stresses that historical analysis will always be anachronistic because the task of historians is not to repeat, but to interpret the ancient sources.³⁹ Brand quotes with approval Charlotte Lydia Riley, who says that history should be rewritten because history is not the past.⁴⁰ This is a salient point. In addition, according to Riley, history should be rewritten for other reasons as well — because that is a historian's job, because of the need to add new voices and new stories, because rewriting is not erasure, because rewriting tells us as much about who we are now as about what happened then. The last observation connects the past to the present and points to their interaction. It also illustrates that historical research is important in the Study of Religion.

Contemporary religions, not least the so-called “world religions,” have long historical roots stretching back hundreds and sometimes thousands of years, a past, which the believers in various ways refer to and keep alive. This is also an argument for studying these religions, not only in the present, but also in the past. Even more important in a comparative discipline is that religion/s of the past make up a significant part of the religion/s that have ever existed. A comparative and global study of religion, which is mainly preoccupied with today and yesterday, has a deficit, to put it mildly.

When we redescribe and reinterpret religion of the past, we use etic terms, and create a shared meta-language by means of comparisons. Oliver Freiberger rightly points out that the discipline has a strong taxonomic interest and “creates, deploys, discusses, and constantly modifies metalinguistic terms and their relation to each other.”⁴¹ At our best, we also do our research in a terminology and from a point of view, which make stories about past religion relevant for the present and in this way take part in the development of the Study of Religion. Historical studies should contribute, sometimes to grand theory, but more importantly, to general theoretical discussions in the discipline and to the necessary theorising of our research, which Brand has pointed out.

Communication with a Larger Audience

With whom do we communicate, and with whom do we want to communicate? What makes us interesting to others? Who are the others? What do we have to offer — to scholars and to society at large?

It should be a goal for scholars of historical religions to communicate more actively, not only with those who share their historical expertise, but also with colleagues in other fields, not least scholars with a special interest

39. Roubekas, 638 (this issue).

40. C. L. Riley, “Why History Should Always be Rewritten,” in *What is History Now? How the Past and the Present Speak to Each Other*, ed. H. Carr and S. Lipscomb (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021), 281.

41. *Considering Comparison*, 128.

in theoretical approaches. It should also be a goal to communicate with scholars from other disciplines, whose theories historians of religion apply in their research. Brand mentions especially social scientists and asks: “What kind of historical questions and approaches can be brought to the table when historians of religion decide to intervene actively in social-theoretical debates, as William H. Sewell Jr. imagines, or when social science start looking for good historical theorising?”⁴² Brand makes the point that comparative approaches and research practices will make historical research more engaging.⁴³

While all research is comparative on some level, full-scale comparisons are rare in the Study of Religion. Comparison is demanding, complex and should be pursued reflexively.⁴⁴ Some of the identity of the discipline lies in its being comparative, but few books and articles are explicitly comparative.⁴⁵ Comparison tends to be an ideal more than a fully realised programme.⁴⁶ To develop comparison as a scientific approach, might be a first step to create new theories of a more general relevance for the Study of Religion. In a similar way, using social theories in the study of historical sources, could lead to interpretations that modified and changed the original theories. This seems seldom to be done, which could indicate that it is normally not a goal among historians of religion to take their research to that level of theorising. When we, unlike anthropologists, seldom construct general theories based on historical studies, is this also because of a general reluctance against doing it? Research on the past relies heavily on source criticism and historical-critical methods, which is absolutely necessary in this type of research, but to remain close to the sources, can perhaps also be an obstacle to formulate more bold hypotheses and take the research to a higher theoretical level.

The marginalisation of historical studies of religion is connected to an inclusion of social theories in the Study of Religion. But why mention only communication with social scientists?

Like in social anthropology, in studies of ancient cultures, the aim is to be as close as possible to what we study. Some of the same skills are needed, but also others. Roubekas stresses that historians of religion should “delve into the literature at hand and decipher the different connotations terms take when encountered within particular examples.”⁴⁷ To make convincing

42. Brand, “Introduction,” 625–26 (this issue).

43. Brand, “Cross-Cultural Generalisation,” 664–66.

44. Freiburger offers fruitful theoretical approaches to comparison in *Considering Comparison*.

45. Recent comparative analysis based on ancient cultures are, for instance, O. Freiburger, *Der Askesediskurs in der Religionsgeschichte: Eine Vergleichende Untersuchung brahmanischer und frühchristlicher Texte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009); K. McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and K. C. Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

46. I. S. Gilhus, “Alive and on the move: the future study of religion.” *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 60–4.

47. Roubekas, 639 (this issue). According to Jörg Rüpke, “the basic of scientific History lies in the historical-critical method,” in “History,” in *The Routledge Handbook*, 291.

studies of historical religion is demanding and includes several skills, not least the ability to read sources in the language, in which they were written, but also, dependent on the sources, to use approaches which we share with History, Archaeology, and Cultural Science, to mention some of our sister disciplines in the humanities. Referring to a “relational paradigm” in the Study of Religion/s, Brand claims that we “interpret and explain processes pertaining to what-we-call-religion in relation to historical societies at large and our historiographical formations and theorizations.”⁴⁸ It begs the question, not only how to communicate better with social scientists, but also how to make the actual communication with other humanistic disciplines more visible. The humanities are important, but perhaps neglected, interlocutors by scholars in the Study of Religion.

Birgit Meyer speaks warmly about transdisciplinary encounters, not least in the humanities: “I see many possibilities for further engagement with scholars in the humanities, as well as in the social sciences (and even the natural sciences).”⁴⁹ At the same time, she is “critical about the strong focus on language and text in the study of religion, I found it fruitful to learn — from scholars in art history and visual culture studies (including what is called *Bildwissenschaft* in German) — how to look at, conceptualize and study images as specific religious ‘media.’” The possibilities that lie in transdisciplinary encounters, for instance, with art history and visual cultural studies open new avenues for historical studies of religion.

As part of the communication with a larger audience, it is also a question what it takes to increase the success and appeal of historical studies and how to write engaging narratives about our field for the public. A realistic goal for most scholars is not to write best sellers, but to write engaging scholarly texts and offer study programmes that appeal to students. Evaluations tend to show that what students want from their professors is profound knowledge about the subject combined with deep enthusiasm, and an ability to communicate. This is probably also the recipe for communicating with the public, generally or in bestsellers. And like communicating with our colleagues in the humanities and the social sciences, there must be a will to do it, which seems sometimes to be missing.

When Brand refers with approval to Richard Swedberg’s article, “Theorizing as a Process,” it is worth noting that Swedberg criticises his colleagues in Sociology and Social Science for being more interested in finished theory than in developing theory.⁵⁰ This means that the problem of lack of theorising is not restricted to scholars of religion. Worth noting is also that Swedberg voices pedagogical concerns: “Some of the tools of theorizing are also collective in the sense that you need to interact with others in order to become more skilled in your own use of them. Educational practices fall,

48. Brand, “Cross-Cultural Generalisation,” 651 (this issue).

49. B. Meyer, “Remapping our mindset: towards a transregional and pluralistic outlook.” *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020): 115.

50. “Before theory comes theorizing or how to make social science more interesting.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 67, no 1 (2016): 5–22.

for example, in this category. How are we to develop useful exercises for theorizing that can be used in classes if not through a process of collective trial-and-error? You first have to design the exercises, then use them, then re-design them based on what happened when they are used and so on.”⁵¹

This advice is also useful for scholars in the Study of Religion. If we are going to theorise more successfully, we must include and perhaps also begin with our students.

Conclusion

The application of the concept of religion on the past is challenging and requires theoretical deliberations, but so does also the application of the concept on the present — the scholarly concept of religion is always dependent on reflexive and self-reflexive thought. As for the so-called “fragmentation” of the discipline of the study of religion, it is not necessarily a negative thing, but could also be seen as an inspiration to make more varied approaches to the past. Most consequential and important for the future of historical studies of religion, and in line with Brand’s suggestions, is that scholars of historical religions to a higher degree participate in theoretical discussions in the discipline and in this way contribute to its further development.⁵²

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are found in the research literature.

51. “Before theory,” 20–21.

52. I want to thank the anonymous reviewer for valuable suggestions to the article.