



New Approaches to Contemporary 'Religious History'. Florenz: European University Institute Florence, 26.05.2009.

Reviewed by Daniel Gerster

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2009)

New Approaches to Contemporary 'Religious History'

The English term 'religious history' is ambivalent. On the one hand, it describes different historiographical approaches to the historical topic 'religion'. On the other hand, 'religious history' may constitute an umbrella term for religious approaches to history. The purpose of this workshop was neither to overcome this interesting contrast, nor to develop a definition of 'religious history'. The workshop, moreover, focused on measuring the field of 'religious history' and on illustrating the multi-fold dimensions of these antagonistic priorities. Against this background, the workshop papers directed their attention to theoretical and methodological turns and their impact on mainstream as well as church and denominational historiographies. Likewise, the participants asked for the influence of new research questions and of historical events. In this context, the workshop focused on the process that is often termed 'secularisation' and the impact of the Second Vatican Council, in accordance with a special interest in the historiography of Catholic religion in Europe. Analytically, the participants of the workshop approached the topic from two different perspectives: One of the panels was concerned with the development of different national historiographies, another one with newer research on transnational and global history.

In the opening presentation to the first panel on different 'national' approaches to religious history BENJAMIN ZIEMANN (University of Sheffield) dealt with the critique of the main master narrative in religious history, the secularisation thesis. Corresponding to Callum Brown's approach in his book 'The Death of Chris-

tianity in Britain' Callum Brown, *The death of Christian Britain. Understanding secularisation 1800-2000*, London 2002. the paper stressed the remaining importance of the concept of 'secularisation' to comprehend the phenomenon of religion in modern society. Against this background, Ziemann again pled for a renewed, observer-related understanding of secularisation. Benjamin Ziemann, *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945-1975*, Göttingen 2007. In his view, within this approach the need emerges to examine intersection of religion with other fields in society, and the Churches as formal organisations as two main dimensions of Christian religion in European history since 1800. In terms of possible intersections between religion and different fields of society the presentation focused on four main areas: social sciences, life science, sports, and economy. At the same time, Ziemann stressed the relevance and uniqueness of formal organisations in the history of Christianity. Due to this, he argued for a renewed church history, which focuses on 'decision-making processes' and church funding.

Following these more general thoughts DANIEL GERSTER (EUI Florence) presented a chronological overview on the way research on Catholicism in Western Germany was conducted after 1945. The paper, thereby, ranged from the historiography of the immediate post-war years to approaches of social and cultural history. Gerster concluded with the argument that the writing of 'general history' in German historiography mostly neglected to deal with Catholic issues for a long time. Only the 'cultural turn' triggered a new concern with the role

of religion in mainstream history. Owing to this, mostly traditional church and denominational history focused on Catholic topics. While the social historical milieu theory enjoyed broad acceptance in this field, until now cultural historical approaches have only received little attention. According to Gerster, this is an astonishing fact since cultural history opens up the discipline to focus on language, symbols, and practices – while Christianity as a religion of the book has always shown much interest in these issues.

MATTEO CAPONI (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa) subsequently summarised how the Italian historiography handled the topic of religion after the Second World War. Analogous to the general cleavage in Italian society Caponi attests two opposing approaches to religious history: a clerical and a laicist one. Thereby, the former apologetically defends the role of the (Catholic) church and prevents scientific research independent from theological and ecclesiastical teaching. On the other hand, during the 1950s and 1960s approaches tended, in general, to practice a constricted mono-denominational Catholic perspective and broadly focused on political action of the organized Italian laity. According to Caponi, only in the early days of the 1970s the Italian historiography started to think about religion in broader conceptions, such as the secularisation thesis. As in the German case, more recent studies fostered these narratives since the 1990s. Many researchers now tend to understand religion simply as one of many other cultural and ideological phenomena.

VINCENT VIAENE (KADOC Leuven) gave the first paper in the afternoon panel on research on transnational and global –religious history–. First, Viaene stressed the new convergence of global and religious history during the recent years: On the one hand, the transformation of the traditional imperial history into transnational and global history offered new perspectives on the role of religion as a non-state actor in the building of the modern world. On the other hand, historians of religion in the modern age have rediscovered the relevance of their subject beyond the nation state. According to Viaene, the new alliance of religious and global history brings mainly three Catholic topics on the agenda: ultramontaniam, the history of missionary activities, and the history of the Holy See. Following this, Viaene presented, second, the concept of –religious internationalism–. Vincent Viaene, *International History, Religious History, Catholic History. Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830-1914)*, in: *European History Quarterly* 38 (2008), pp. 578-607. This approach, which was developed by a research group from

Oxford, Cambridge, London, and Leuven, aims for a systematic reflection on the role of religion in processes of globalisation, and on the parallel transformation of world religions in communities of opinion. Viaene, therefore, put three different definitions of –religious internationalism– forward to discussion.

The subsequent presentation of THOMAS CAUVIN (EUI Florence) focused on the opening-up of the Irish historiography on Catholics to transnational approaches. Cauvin, first of all, emphasised that the traditional national(ist) history broadly identified Catholicism with Irishness, and henceforth stressed the role of the Catholic Church in the nation building process. Since the 1970s a new revisionist approach has questioned this master narrative, and thus encouraged new perspectives on religious history. This was related, above all, to the challenges which arose from the Northern Irish issue. Research then tended to question the dominant role of the Catholic Church in politics but also of Catholicism as a whole in society. Consequently, the breakdown of the national-geographical framework brought into view the transnational setting of the Catholic Church.

Finally, AGNÉS DESMAZIÈRES (EUI Florence) discussed in her paper the role of Catholic non-governmental organisations (NGO) as transnational actors. As a follow-up to the presentation of Vincent Viaene, Desmazières underlined the relevance of a transnational –religious history–. Against this background, the paper focused on the role of international religious actors in shaping a –global culture–. In her presentation Desmazières exemplified this new research field on the interplay between Catholic NGOs and international inter-governmental organisations as the League of Nations, and the United Nations. Following a short outline of the history of the –Catholic International Organisations– (CIO), which were entrusted by the Vatican to present Catholic interests, the paper proposed a sophisticated research design of the future study.

During the concluding discussions the participants of the workshop stressed the importance of re-thinking historical approaches to religion. Against this background, the workshop highlighted the different methodological and theoretical conceptions on stage. It provided a forum for closer looks at newer transnational and global approaches and to discuss different national developments. In his concluding remarks HEINZ GERHARD HAUPT (EUI Florence) pointed out that additional national case studies, for example about France, Poland, the United States and Spain, would be needed to assess the state of

the art in greater details. However, Haupt also emphasised that the workshop and its discussions succeeded in offering substantial insights into recent trends in 'religious history' on modern Catholicism.

Conference overview:

Panel 1: Different National Approaches on 'Religious History'

Chair: Agnès Desmazières

Thomas Cauvin (EUI Florence), Introduction

Benjamin Ziemann (University of Sheffield), Conceptualising the 'Proprium' in a Secular Age. Religious History in Great Britain and Germany

Daniel Gerster (EUI Florence), 'Religion' as an Object of West German Post-war Historiography. An Outline focusing on the Development of West German Catholicism

Matteo Caponi (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa), Political and Religious Cultures: Italian Historiography reinvestigates Christianity in the Age of Secularization

Concluding Remarks on 'Different National Approaches on 'Religious History''

Panel 2: Transnational and Global 'Religious History'

Chair: Daniel Gerster

Vincent Viaene (KADOC Leuven), Religious History and Global History: Promessi Sposi of Historiography

Thomas Cauvin (EUI Florence), Rome, Dublin, Belfast: a Transnational 'Religious History'?

Agnès Desmazières (EUI Florence), Rome, Geneva, New York: Catholic NGOs as Transnational Actors

Concluding Remarks on 'Transnational and Global 'Religious History''

Heinz Gerhard Haupt (EUI Florence), Conclusion

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Citation: Daniel Gerster. Review of , *New Approaches to Contemporary 'Religious History'*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

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