



Prospects for relational approaches in the Study of Religion. A response to Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz and Mattias Brand

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Abstract

This response to Brand's and Kollmar-Paulenz' commentaries further develops the case for a relational paradigm in the Study of Religion by addressing critiques concerning comparison, generalization, and historical scope. It argues that relational approaches do not reject abstraction but relocate scholarly inquiry from the essence of "religion" to the historically contingent relations through which the category is constituted. A comparative survey of English, French, Spanish, and Italian encyclopedias demonstrates that the shift from essentialist to relational understandings extends beyond the German context while simultaneously challenging narratives of a homogeneous European Enlightenment. Rather than abandoning comparison, the article advocates historically situated, non-universalizing forms of theorization that remain sensitive to conceptual dynamics and relations of power. It concludes by arguing that safeguarding epistemological pluralism and academic freedom is indispensable for the future development of relational scholarship in the Study of Religion.

1. Introduction

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to both commentators for their thoughtful engagement with my article. Their contributions help to broaden the scope of the discussion while also clarifying several ambiguities and potential misunderstandings. Each has situated the discussion of a relational paradigm within a wider intellectual context: Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz by raising the question of the unity of the European Enlightenment, and Mattias Brand by addressing the possibilities of theory formation and comparison in the academic study of religion. Both of these issues are of such breadth and complexity that they would merit monographic treatment in their own right. Such an undertaking, however, lies beyond the scope of the concise response format provided here. I have therefore sought to clarify several aspects of my original argument while offering a number of focused reflections that I hope will stimulate further discussion of these broader questions.

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2. The prospects of a relational research program

In his response, Brand (2026) deals with two major issues: Firstly, how certain approaches—in this case represented by Markus A. Davidson and Katja Rakow—can be seen in the context of a relational paradigm. And secondly, how this paradigm translates into a research program that still enables us to establish generalizations, definitions, categories, and taxonomies. I appreciate his attempt to develop four guiding principles, which I view as closely connected to Volkhard Krech's outline of entangled histories (2012; 2024).

I do not go into the details of the debate that Davidson initiated in the Dutch *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* in 2020, as this would require the inclusion of the voices of others who reacted in that volume (such as Arie Molendijk, Kocku von Stuckrad, Eric Venbrux, Arjan Sterken, and Kees de Groot). However, I believe it is essential to clarify several points.

Brand's "table 1" provides a clear and analytically useful comparison of the Aristotelian and the relational paradigms (2026: 7). However, it omits one issue of fundamental importance, a shortcoming that has significant implications for the entirety of his subsequent argument: What is the object of study? As we are not just comparing different theories but paradigms, *the rules by which we create the "map"*—our object of research—are themselves subject to change (Kuhn 1970: 109–111).¹ As I underlined in reference to Kuhn:

“ With a paradigm shift, “the world changes” on different levels: First, after a paradigm shift, new objects, phenomena, and problems may be present that did not exist before. Second, previously known objects are seen in a new light; that is, they are explained by new “laws” and regularities. (Krüger 2022: 64–65)

The two paradigms differ fundamentally: “They share neither a common conceptual vocabulary nor a common object of study.” (Rein 2015: 12) Following the Aristotelian paradigm, the object is religion. Following the relational paradigm it is “interactions, communications, and relationships of people through and around ‘religion,’ in all its historical and intercultural reciprocity”. (Krüger 2022: 81) With the latter, the constructivity of the concept is not only suppositional but is itself an object of research.

I will try to illustrate this with reference to Brand's considerations. He proposes as the first principle for relational generalizations to “acknowledge the complex entanglements of the *comparanda*”. (2026: 9) This is true, but more precisely we should acknowledge that the *comparanda*—or better: the *relata*—are constituted by their relations. They do not exist without being seen in relation. This is not an ontological claim—we consider these arguments only within the theory of science. As soon as an object is observed, theorized, and analyzed by us as researchers, it is related. To extend the metaphor of the fishing net or the lenses through which we view the world: From *a scientific perspective*, we may conclude that nothing exists beyond the

¹ This is why I would strongly reject the idea that there are “semi-essentialist approaches” (Brand 2026: 3); either they are based on essentialist determinations of religion, or they are not. The essentialist and the relational approach operate in different “worlds” (Kuhn 1970: 111–135).

reach of our conceptual net or outside the field of vision afforded by our theoretical lenses—regardless of whether these phenomena exist independently in the world. This aligns smoothly with Brand’s call for a “double contextualization of our research: within the historical level of our sources and within the contemporary historiographical traditions and settings”. (2026: 9)

This distinction is of fundamental importance: It is one thing—as Davidson argues—to identify *religion* as the object of the study of religion; it is another to examine the manifold forms of human relations constituted through and in connection with or even through the rejection of “religion” (in quotation marks). There do exist different rules how to draw the map between “semi-essentialist approaches” (Brand 2026: 3) and relational approaches.

The second fundamental issue raised by Brand concerns the conditions under which generalizations can be legitimately made in scholarly research. It is beyond question, in my view, that academic inquiry necessarily involves processes of abstraction and generalization from particular cases. Inductive reasoning, in Greek *epagoge* (ἐπαγωγή), was first formulated by Aristotle (*Analytica Posteriora*) and later systematically elaborated by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* of 1620. The crucial question is not whether scholarly research inevitably relies on generalizations, but rather how these generalizations are produced, justified, and limited in their scope.

What is indeed beyond the scope of relational approaches are universal taxonomies, terminologies, and typologies. The crucial epistemological divide concerns the point at which “general” and “systematic” categorizations which Brand considers essential to “systematic-phenomenological” perspectives (2026: 6–8) are transformed into universalizing claims. Relational approaches are inherently relativistic in the sense that they reject the possibility of a final truth and of a transcendent, unconditioned “meta”-standpoint from which such claims could be legitimized. Frankly, I find little evidence that scholars in the study of religion today continue to pursue all-encompassing taxonomies of the kind developed by Gerardus van der Leeuw and Friedrich Heiler, nor are there any convincing attempts to formulate the “one big beautiful” theory of religion.

Does this imply that our discipline is dissolving into particularism and postmodern confusion? Certainly not. As I have already emphasized (Krüger 2026: 28–29), the concept of “religion” remains a meaningful analytical category for research within contemporary cultures shaped by European intellectual traditions. At the same time, it is essential to account for the fine-grained historical dynamics of the past three centuries even in this European context and, from a synchronic perspective, for the enduring semantic ambiguity of the concept of “religion” across different social, ethnic, and cultural settings of a given society. For the cross-cultural perspective, the Leipzig research project *Multiple Secularities* has provided a particularly instructive example of how comparative research can be pursued with methodological rigor, while remaining attentive to conceptual and historical dynamics and avoiding universalizing claims (Kleine/Wohlrab-Sahr/Witte 2024).

In contrast to Brand (2026: 9), however, I remain unconvinced that explicit definitions are still necessary. There is no doubt that empirical research depends on the operationalization of concepts in order to produce valid and reliable findings within specific historical and social contexts. From a relational perspective, however, definitive and unambiguous definitions are neither attainable nor analytically desirable. If we return to the origins of the debate over the definition of religion—to James H. Leuba’s oft-cited lament about the proliferation of competing definitions (1901)—this appears, from a relational perspective, not as a deficiency or failure of scholarship, but rather as an inevitable consequence of the historical and relational character of the concept itself. Recognizing this diversity opens up the possibility of capturing often controversial social dynamics surrounding the practices and understandings of “religion” (dynamics that, of course, also shape scholarly inquiry itself).

3. The possible particularity of German encyclopedias

The issue raised by Kollmar-Paulenz (2026) concerning the particularity of my empirical findings is entirely legitimate: To what extent can results derived from the analysis of German encyclopedias be generalized to other Western and Southern European languages? Wouldn’t this suggest the difficult-to-prove idea of a homogeneous European Enlightenment? As I have already outlined the indicators for a relational paradigm beyond a German lexicographical discourse, taking the currents of our discipline into account (Krüger 2022: 81–89; Krüger 2026: 22–31), discussion of this question here is limited to the identification of the earlier Aristotelian paradigm.

From a genealogical perspective, it may first be noted that virtually all encyclopedic works of the Latin hemisphere of the Middle Ages and early modern times oriented themselves—both in the content of their entries and in their arrangement—on the model of Isidore of Seville’s work of the 7th century. His *Etymologiarum sive originum* introduced Aristotle’s category theory and his method of interpretation (Diesner 1978: 84; Isidor 1985/2008: chapters XXIV, XXVII). Understanding etymology as a teleological, even chiliastic endeavor, to reveal the true (divine) meaning of a term from its assumed origin, it lays the foundation for a Christian epistemology under Neoplatonic premises (Isidor 1985/2008: chapter XXIX; Diesner 1978: 89–90; Schweikard 1985: 7–16; Habermehl 2006: 62).

The work’s great popularity over more than eight centuries can be discerned from the more than 1,000 surviving manuscripts and its multiple printings, continuing up to and even beyond 1472. One must also take into account the six critical editions since 1788, as well as translations into Spanish, Italian, and German. Ernst Robert Curtius even referred to Isidore’s work as the foundational book—the *Grundbuch*—of the European Middle Ages (Curtius 1952: 14–23, 31; Collison 1964: 33–35; Küster 2006: 294–301; Isidor 2008: 5–14). The economic factor in the persistence of definitions should also not be underestimated, as it resulted in articles being replicated—sometimes *verbatim*—across successive encyclopedias over the course of centuries (Ernst 2002). Based on this context, it is plausible to assume that in all Latin-influenced cultures

of Europe, the practice of defining (including “religion”) took on similar forms until the early modern period.

I did not intend for my study to claim that the Enlightenment was a homogeneous process—neither in German nor in other European languages. On the contrary: The examination of definitions serves as an excellent example of how heterogeneous the Enlightenment era was as a philosophical movement. In order to capture precisely this diversity, the historically highly heterogeneous German-speaking area was selected for the original lexical analysis (Krüger 2017: 20 FN 64). Despite the considerable heterogeneity across different regional and political contexts, I would nevertheless maintain the claim that, beginning with the Enlightenment, the social structures of knowledge gradually—yet fundamentally—shifted toward what Karl Popper (1945) has described as an “open society” and Paul Feyerabend (1978) as a “free society”.

But let us first explore a few encyclopedias in English, French, Spanish, and Italian, as suggested by Kollmar-Paulenz. At this point, only a superficial survey is feasible (my original analysis of German lexica alone required approximately one and a half years of work). For each language I aimed to consider at least one theological and one general lexicon. Adverse economic conditions have long constrained the production of specialized theological encyclopedias, resulting, since the 18th century, in their frequent appearance as revised editions or simple copies of earlier works or as straightforward translations of existing ones. Within the field of theology, the works under review frequently originated in the German-speaking world, probably due to academic networks. For example, the influential *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York, 1908–1914) was based on the German *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Leipzig, 3rd edition of 1896–1909) and the Spanish *Diccionario enciclopédico de la teología católica* (Madrid, 1867–1868) was a translation of the *Kirchenlexikon* (Freiburg, 1847–1860).

The first selected work in English is the US-American *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907–1913), which was not conceived as a strictly theological work but, according to the editorial committee, was intended to address a broad readership, since previous lexica had provided only an inadequate treatment of the world and of specific topics from a Catholic perspective (Catholic 1917: iii). In his article “Religion”, the priest and theologian Charles Francis Aiken follows the classical path, adopting Lactantius’ etymology, which determines *religare* as a bond with God—an interpretation already deemed authoritative by Isidore (Krüger 2022: 74; Krüger 2026: 14–15).

“ Religion in its simplest form implies the notion of being bound to God; the same notion is uppermost in the word religion in its most specific sense, as applied to the life of poverty, chastity, and obedience to which individuals voluntarily bind themselves by vows more or less solemn. Hence those who are thus bound are known as religious. (Aiken 1911: 739)

This is followed by a hierarchical typology of religions, which is closely linked to a specifically Catholic sense of mission (Aiken 1911: 740–748).

The anonymous author of the article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (8th edition, 1859) also develops his definition of religion from Cicero's and Lactantius' etymology:

“ If the Ciceronian etymology be the true one, the word religion will denote the diligent study of whatever pertains to the worship of the gods; but, according to the other derivation, which we are inclined to prefer, it denotes that obligation which we feel on our minds from the relation in which we stand to some superior power. (EncBrit 1859: 5)

The 13-volume *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, may be regarded as one of the first lexica on religion to pursue a perspective beyond theology. It brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, Oriental studies, and philology. In his entry on “Religion”, the Hebraist Stanley Arthur Cook begins by referring to the well-known observation of the psychologist James H. Leuba (1901), namely that, given the sheer diversity of definitions of religion, no universally acceptable definition can be formulated. Unlike the atheist Leuba, however, Cook underscores the significance of personal religious experience (Cook 1918: 662–663). His extensive essay (of 30 pages) subsequently offers a comprehensive introduction to all major contemporary theories of religion (Cook 1918).

The dominating French encyclopedia of the early 18th century was the *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin* (better known as *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*), which was published in seven editions from 1704 to 1771 in Trévoux by the Jesuit thinkers René-Joseph de Tournemine and Claude Buffier. They understood their encyclopedic enterprise as a kind of apologetics of Catholicism towards Jansenism (Le Guern 1983)² and built their understanding of religion on the traditional etymology, without integrating any explicit philological references (Trévoux 1704: no pages, digital 796).

In the more recent encyclopedia *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (1899–1950) the theologian Étienne Magnin (professor of canon law at the Institut Catholique de Paris) presents a sophisticated and detailed etymology in order to develop a true and essentialist understanding of religion (Magnin 1937: 2182–2185). He further engages in his apologetic essay (of more than 100 pages) with all the major contemporary theories of religion (Magnin 1937).³

A fundamentally different structure was adopted by the famous *Encyclopédie*, edited between 1751 and 1780 by Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert (and, from 1757 onward, by Louis de Jaucourt). Its critical stance toward political authority and the church, and its broader Enlightenment agenda, became evident not only in the individual articles but also in the organization and interrelation of the sciences, as articulated in d'Alembert's introduction and the

² Jansenism (derived from its founder's name Cornelius Jansen) was a Catholic theological teaching that considered the significance of free will in relation to divine grace. In France, it emerged as a political movement critical of royal absolutism.

³ Potentially the most all-encompassing religion encyclopedia in French language, the *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, which has been in preparation since 1909 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané), has so far only reached the letter M (in volume 33).

accompanying *arbre généalogique des sciences et des arts principaux*. Here—unlike in nearly all earlier encyclopedic projects—knowledge no longer derives from God, nor is theology conceived as the mother of all sciences. Instead, all branches of human knowledge emerge from the innate faculties of reason, imagination, and memory. In this sense, the significance of religion is not traced back etymologically (and thus in traditional theological terms). Rather, in his article, the physician and philosopher Louis de Jaucourt (1765) develops a compelling argument for the idea of natural religion based on reason (Collison 1964: 119–125; Feil 2007: 342–351).

As theological 19th century lexicons in Spain are mainly translations from earlier German or French works, the Spanish *Diccionario Enciclopédico Hispano-Americano de Literatura* (Barcelona, 1887–1910) appears quite progressive. The author of the article on religion, Urbano González Serrano, drawing on the etymological definition of *religion*, develops a universal-anthropological foundation of the subject: “No ser capaz de religión, era entre los antiguos una de las señales características de un ser irracional.”⁴ (González Serrano 1895: 363) As the editors of the *Diccionario* sought to recruit the leading intellectuals of their time as contributors, González, as a representative of the then influential *krausopositivismo*,⁵ was able to present his conception of religion, which combined a scientific positivism with pantheistic convictions:

“No, no pudo nacer de cabeza humana combinación tan asombrosa; no pudo el espíritu finito idear un plan tan vasto, tan estupendo, donde se trabaran de tal suerte unos arcanos con otros arcanos, que del fondo de su obscuridad pavorosa arrojaran rayos de vivísima luz para esclarecer y resolver todas las cuestiones que sobre el origen y destinos del hombre andaba haciendo la Filosofía. (González Serrano 1895: 368)⁶

Other popular works, such as the most comprehensive *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana* (Madrid/Barcelona 1905–2011, also known as *Espasa*) reject these progressive ambitions. The entry on “Religion” in that work derives the concept of religion in the traditional manner from its etymology and consistently adopts a Catholic perspective, contrasting Catholic religious orders and institutions primarily with what it terms “primitive religions” (Espasa 1923).

⁴ Engl.: “Among the ancients, being incapable of religion was one of the characteristic signs of an irrational being.”

⁵ Although the ideas of the philosopher and social reformer Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832) remained largely unknown in Germany, they gained remarkably wide reception in Spain and Latin America under the label *krausismo*. From his conception of the essential nature of God, Krause derived both a comprehensive system of the sciences and a social utopia envisioning the unity of humankind. By the late 19th century, this intellectual tradition had given rise, among other developments, to *krausopositivismo*, a movement that sought to reconcile scientific rationalism and positivism with Christian spirituality (Stoetzer 1998).

⁶ Engl.: “No, such an astonishing combination could not have been conceived by the human mind; no finite spirit could have devised such a vast, stupendous plan, in which mysteries were intertwined with other mysteries in such a way that, from the depths of their terrifying obscurity, they cast rays of vivid light to illuminate and resolve all the questions that philosophy had been piling up about the origin and destiny of man.”

As with the Spanish encyclopedic undertakings, the Italian versions of theological lexicons also drew heavily on earlier German or French editions in many cases, such as the strongly apologetic *Dizionario enciclopedico di teologia, di diritto canonico, di archeologia, di liturgia e di disciplina ecclesiastica* (Naples 1843–1846) and the *Dizionario teologico* (Brescia 1967–1968). Original Italian encyclopedias define religion in line with Lactantius’ traditional etymology, as in the *Dizionario di teologia dommatica* (Rome 1952): “[...] generalmente è un legame, un vincolo morale tra Dio e gli uomini, come risulta dalla storia delle religioni e dalla considerazione del naturale rapporto della creatura razionale al Creatore.” (Parente/Piolanti/Garofalo 1952: 288)⁷

Similarly, echoing the etymological interpretations proposed by Cicero and Lactantius, the art historian Francesco Zanotto defines the essence of religion as an obligation and a bond with the divine in the popular *Enciclopedia italiana e dizionario della conversazione* (Zanotto 1850).

From this admittedly cursory survey of historical English, French, Spanish, and Italian encyclopedias, several conclusions may be drawn. Given their genealogical dependence on earlier Latin books, it is hardly surprising that theological reference works, as well as a number of general encyclopedias, derive the traditional definition of the essence of religion from its etymology. As was already observed in the German-language encyclopedias, contemporary intellectual movements and particular positionings towards the (Catholic) Church likewise shaped these accounts. In some cases, we may observe already a departure from an essentialist definition in favor of critical one or a diversity of perspectives on “religion”. Particularly striking, however, was the extent to which the economics of encyclopedia production also proved influential: In both the Italian and Spanish contexts, already established French and German works were frequently translated or adapted rather than replaced by entirely new reference works.

A paradigmatic shift from an Aristotelian method of defining religion in terms of its essence to a broader, relational understanding thus appears plausible not only within the German context but across Western Europe more generally.⁸

I am grateful that Kollmar-Paulenz relates these questions to the debate over the homogeneity of the Enlightenment, thereby enabling us to place our field within a broader historical context. I would argue, however, that scholarship has since advanced further. Leaving aside historical studies that—sometimes with explicit political intentions—seek to identify a core of the European Enlightenment, such as tolerance (Warman 2016) or reason (Saltzwedel 2017), there now appears to be a strong scholarly consensus that the Enlightenment must be understood as a global, plural, and relational phenomenon.

⁷ Engl.: “[...] It is generally a bond, a moral bond between God and humankind, as is evident from the history of religions and from consideration of the natural relationship between rational beings and the Creator.”

⁸ A survey of 20th century Eastern Europe would be a promising avenue for future research as well, as recent scholarship suggests that heterogeneous interpretations and practices towards religion were possible even within the framework of Marxist–Leninist state ideologies (Vitanova-Kerber 2023).

Ever since the landmark volume *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Porter/Teich 1981) broke away from the tradition of considering the Enlightenment as a purely French or universal phenomenon, many studies on European and American contexts have focused on the specific local political, economic, and religious realities that filtered and adapted the original philosophical ideas (Himmelfarb 2004). At the same time, the perspective adopted by the authors of these studies shifted from abstract philosophical ideas to specific social milieus where Enlightenment ideas have been put into practice (Munck 2000; Beaurepaire 2004).

In this regard, Kollmar-Paulenz rightly points to Sebastian Conrad's seminal essay "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique" (2012). He criticizes the way that traditional histories treat European thinkers (Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau) as the sole creators of Enlightenment ideas, which non-Europeans merely copied or received later. In contrast to these assumptions Conrad sees "Enlightenment" as a reciprocal, global process with multiple authors worldwide: Intellectuals across the globe—from Cairo and Calcutta to Tokyo and Shanghai—who actively reshaped, translated, and invoked "enlightened" ideas for their own local political and social projects. According to this view, ideas about reason, human rights, civilization, and progress arose precisely as responses to global encounters, imperialism, and trade networks. And, *vice versa*, European debates were deeply shaped by information arriving from Asia, the Americas, and Africa: "In many ways, central elements of the cultural transformations that are customarily summarized as 'Enlightenment' need to be understood as a reaction to the global entanglements of the times." (Conrad 2012: 1010). Although Conrad does not use the term relational, here, his approach clearly reflects these basic ideas of *relata* being constituted through their relations. His article also parallels the call for entangled histories (of religion) made by Volkhart Krech (2012) in the same year.

Building on these impulses, more recent scholarship has developed a distinct focus on the interactions and mutual entanglements between different cultural spheres during the Enlightenment. I will draw on one example, here: The historian Alexander Statman in his study *A Global Enlightenment: Western Progress and Chinese Science* (2023) departs from the view of the European Enlightenment as a self-contained, linear rise of Western rationality; he rather demonstrates that European ideas about science, history, and human development were shaped through continuous cross-cultural dialogue with Chinese natural philosophy. China was initially praised as a paragon of rational governance, philosophy, and moral order during the early Enlightenment, before later being re-framed as static, dogmatic, and incapable of progress on its own. Statman concludes that the idea of science was born out of intense, reciprocal exchanges with Chinese knowledge—exchanges that were later rewritten or forgotten to construct the myth of European exceptionalism and science as a progressive "Western" phenomenon (Statman 2023: 233–242).⁹

⁹ Although Jonathan Israel claims to also follow a strong comparative approach, he still upholds the idea of a universal European foundation of Enlightenment. Even in his most recent work, the comprehensive *Historical Dictionary of Enlightenment* (2nd ed., 2023), extra-European perspectives are totally marginalized.

In this regard, I would suggest turning again to the original question by Kollmar-Paulenz: whether the Enlightenment can be seen as universal and homogenous movement or not. The interesting epistemological question is why and how this narrative of homogeneity and European universalism was initiated, further developed, and eventually challenged by alternative historiographic models. As Reinhart Koselleck stresses, history is not an assembly of facts but a conscious selection by historians that reflects their own times, interests, and intentions. When, for example, Caroline Warman (2016) highlighted the idea of tolerance as the principal value of European Enlightenment, that was a direct and explicit reaction to the horrific terrorist attacks on the Paris office of Charlie Hebdo in 2015.

Our discipline's debate over the definition of "religion" can be considered a microcosm of this broader discussion around the Enlightenment. The fundamental questions and tensions between universal claims and relational contextualizations are similar. Crucial for both fields is to understand that these definitions (or historiographic accounts) are always acts of power (Krüger 2022: 88–89; Krüger 2026: 30–31). They not only determine who is in and who is out, but also establish orders, categories, and hierarchies. This observation makes it crucial that we include the broader publication context of the definitions of "religion": In the more extensive entries in the European encyclopedias that we reviewed for this response, the definition of "religion" was typically followed by a hierarchical classification of religions—most commonly distinguishing between historical and so-called "primitive" religions—which, in some cases, ultimately developed into an explicitly apologetic defense of Christianity or Catholicism. There is no ivory tower innocence in the practice of defining—we must consider where the ivory comes from.

4. The risk of "Westernism"

I am equally grateful for Kollmar-Paulenz' second critical observation, as it points to a potential misunderstanding. She criticizes me (along with Winston L. King) for postulating that the European practice of defining "religion" constitutes a uniquely European phenomenon without comparing it to other traditions in a global context. Furthermore, she argues that my account implies that efforts to define the concept of "religion" and to distinguish it from other societal spheres neither occurred nor could have occurred outside Europe (Kollmar-Paulenz 2026: 5–6).

In response, I would like to emphasize the importance of reading my argument in its entirety and within its proper context. In fact, I concluded that not only do concrete definitions imply a *Eurocentric normativity* but so does the very question *What is religion?* **in the context** of this specific, universal practice rooted in the Aristotelian theory of definitions. From the broader framework of my analysis, it should be clear that also the specific practice of publication in large volume works establishing orders, hierarchies, and cross-references of the different entries is a specific characteristic that developed over centuries in the European cultural sphere.

I aimed to show that it is equally crucial to consider the social conditions that enabled the emergence of both general and specialized encyclopedias: the increasing scientification of Christian theologies (in parallel with developments in other academic disciplines) and the

emancipation movements led by the bourgeoisie, which regarded education as a prerequisite for political participation. It is in this context that Chambers spoke of the establishment of a *Republic of Letters* (Krüger 2026: 8–11; Yeo 2001: 38–45).

At no point did I intend to suggest that the European practice of defining in general, or of defining “religion” in particular, was exceptional or unique. Such a claim would ultimately undermine the central thrust of my argument in favor of a relational paradigm.¹⁰

5. Outlook: Academic freedom under threat

Since I worked on my original article in 2020/21 our Western academic world has changed profoundly, as political pressure—foremost in the United States—has been reframing scientific inquiry by prioritizing political alignment over independent academic exploration. In that country, a genuine form of research censorship operates through legislative gags, financial levers, administrative policy shifts, and widespread institutional self-censorship. State legislatures are increasingly passing bills restricting state-funded research into topics such as critical race theory, gender studies, public health disparities, and environmental policy. Universities face mounting pressure through tenure reforms, post-tenure re-evaluations, and administrative disciplinary threats targeting outspoken faculty members (terminating tenured faculty based on policy violations or student complaints). This environment creates a pervasive chilling effect across higher education, forcing junior and non-tenured scholars to avoid sensitive topics entirely. Researchers frequently alter abstracts, redact keywords, or abandon viable projects to safeguard their grant funding and career stability. National security policies further restrict cross-border international collaborations and international co-authorship. Institutional watchdog organizations, including PEN America and the American Association of University Professors, have been documenting this steady rise in the formal targeting of faculty members and the defunding of research initiatives.¹¹ Similar tendencies have also become apparent in the Netherlands in recent years, albeit not on the same scale or with the same degree of intensity.¹²

How do these alarming developments relate to our issue of shifting paradigms? Earlier, I sought to emphasize that the progress of paradigms does not imply a closer approximation to “truth” or “objective reality”. New paradigms can only provide more reliable and comprehensive solutions *to apparently unresolved problems*; fundamentally, they may also redefine which problems are considered relevant at all. Only in this sense, according to Kuhn, can we speak of progress (Krüger 2022: 65; Krüger 2026: 5). This statement, however, also points to a potential risk: Whether specific problems are principally considered “relevant” may be subject to political influence or alignment. In autocratic systems, critical and relativist approaches are generally more vulnerable

¹⁰ It is in this sense that I also understand Winston L. King’s statement (2005: 7692): namely, that the attempt to define the essence of religion in *this particular way* is a product of the distinctive tradition of European speculative philosophy.

¹¹ Book bans and restrictions of free speech on campus have been documented at PEN America (pen.org) and the AAUP (aaup.org).

¹² See the statements of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (knew.nl/en).

to censorship and repression, as they challenge the categorical certainty and normative definitions, theories, and values that such systems seek to uphold. The limits of the open or free society determine the limits of progress in science (Krüger 2022: 82; Krüger 2026: 23).

This is why I strongly welcome Brand's engagement with the question of modes of publication and his attempt to advance this discussion in a programmatic way (2026: 10–16). We must acknowledge that, in the academic study of knowledge, we have devoted considerable attention to the intellectual structures underlying the production of knowledge within scholarly traditions, in particular, while insufficiently addressing their relationship to the infrastructures of knowledge and the economic conditions upon which they depend. Brand's proposal to consider the publication of scientific findings in terms of a broader spectrum of media—from academic journals to popular streaming platforms—may help to reconnect science with the broader needs and questions of a non-academic audience. Beyond our intellectual circles and highly specialized schools of thought, it forces us to rethink the consequences of our research—the famous “so what?” What do we actually say? What are the core findings of our research? What are the more general conclusions relevant for the larger society? Our academic system of status and funding, that favors specialized and theoretically complex publications in international journals does not support these ambitions at all.

In the worst case, a purely academic debate risks degenerating into an endless cycle of deconstruction rather than contributing to the empirical analysis of how categories are assembled, stabilized, and transformed in concrete social and material practices—a shift in the role of critique advocated by Bruno Latour (2004: 225, 244–248).¹³ Brand's considerations on broader modes of publication complement Latour's approach pragmatically and they also resonate with more recent efforts to advance citizen science as a means of scholarly inquiry (Vohland et al. 2021).

I prefer this solution to the one proposed by Jason Ā. Storm in his ambitious and thought-provoking *Metamodernism* (2021). I can readily understand the sympathy Brand expresses for Storm's project (Brand 2023), since it promises to bring “light into the abyss” of the postmodern “disintegration of meaning” (Storm 2021: 203). Yet this promise comes at a considerable theoretical cost. Storm explicitly grounds his epistemological framework in a *process metaphysics* or *process ontology* (2021: 88–94, 204). Moreover, he seeks to overcome the current crisis of the humanities by introducing a robust ethical teleology into academic inquiry, identifying compassion as the central principle for realizing what he calls “Revolutionary Happiness” (2021: 266–273). As he puts it: “Irony and despair can become fierce joy and hope. Beyond anti-essentialism is not a new essentialism, but a world of becoming.” (2021: 5)

To be clear, I have no objection to scholars of religion reflecting on ethics and values—whether in relation to our scholarly work or in our roles as human beings, citizens, or political actors.

¹³ Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (2005) is another approach closely linked to a relational paradigm in the social sciences.

However, reintroducing values and teleology into the epistemology of scholarly inquiry inevitably draws research into normative controversies over ethics and metaphysics that science itself is incapable of resolving. As compelling and admirable as such aims as happiness and compassion may appear, there is no principled basis on which they could be privileged over alternative normative ideals grounded in other ethical traditions—for example, fulfilling one’s “natural role” as woman to bear and raise children, following your *dharma*, or striving to live free from sinful temptation. Once epistemology is made dependent upon such normative commitments, scholarly inquiry loses its capacity to adjudicate between them. In this respect, I concur with Alfred North Whitehead’s assessment: “The recourse to metaphysics is like throwing a match into a powder magazine. It blows up the whole arena.” (1920: 29)

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