

What is the Science of Religion? A Contribution to the Methodology of Historical Research on Religion

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The term “Science of Religion” [*Religionswissenschaft*] has been used in different ways by different authors. Some even avoid this expression altogether, claiming that only the designation “history of religion” [*Religionsgeschichte*] is valid. To the extent that this is not merely a dispute over words, but rather the expression of a principled standpoint, we cannot be spared an examination of the reasons upon which this view is based.

Expressions such as Science of Religion and History of Religion are in fact just as conventional as Linguistics and History of Language. There are reasons for favouring the one term or preferring the other. Which is ultimately preferred will always be, to a certain extent, a matter for the subjective judgment of the individual. Whoever is convinced that religion can only be recognized in terms of the historical development it has undergone might be inclined to conduct their research in the name of History of Religion. By contrast, one who hopes to gain important insights into the universal nature of religion and the meaning of each of its manifestations from the comparison of as many religions as possible – including those that are unrelated to each other – will prefer the term Science of Religion. If we keep in mind that neither the one nor the other method enjoys an exclusive claim to justification, and that when we express a preference, we do not advocate for an inefficient sequestration of studies in the two fields from each other, we cannot see any disadvantage for knowledge as a whole in the division of the fields of study. Only the tendency to separate the History of Religion and the Science of Religion from each other would be of dire consequences for both parts.¹

¹ The first to use the term “Science of Religion” [*Religionswissenschaft*] or “Comparative Study of Religion” [*Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*] with an awareness that it corresponded to a subject which neither Theology nor the Philosophy of Religion had taken possession of, was F. Max Müller in the 1867 preface to the 1st volume of his *Chips from a German Workshop* (published in German under the title *Essays* I. vol., p. IX). In his essay “Ueber falsche Analogien in der vergleichenden Theologie” [“On False Analogies in Comparative Theology”], written in 1870, he reverted, however, to conventional usage. Nonetheless, from then on, and already in the lectures he gave at the Royal Institution in London in the same year as that essay was written, which were later published as “Introduction to the Science of Religion” [“Einleitung in die vergleichende Religionswissenschaft”], he always (p. 44 of his *Natural Religion* is no exception) uses the aforementioned designation. The same has become accepted in Germany, England and America, while in France, Belgium and Holland “History of Religion” has prevailed. The majority of researchers of religion, of course, are pursuing the same goal. For some, the designation they have chosen is probably connected with the intention of more clearly demarcating

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The choice between the two terms only assumes principal significance where, by the use of the one, one seeks to deny that which the other admits, or vice versa. Thereupon, "Science of Religion" and "History of Religions" cease to be merely conventional terms, and the two are no longer considered equal in rights, but have rather become slogans for parties to a conflict and have no legitimacy in science.

As a rule, however, the presence of such views adjunctive to science are a sign that the practitioner is not clear about the standards that science requires, whether in terms of foundations, research methods or both.

Now, first of all, as far as the foundations are concerned, on which the construction of our science rises, its empirical character should absolutely be determined. Everything that is not an empirical fact, and as such is not either handed down or deduced from facts, does not exist for us and consequently cannot provide any colour for the painting that we have to draw of religious life in general and in particular. If, however, it were simply a matter of depicting the details on the basis of the sources, without regard to their historical relations to each other, the correct term would not be "history of religion" but rather "description of religion". In fact, there are those who would like to merge the scientific consideration of religions into descriptive hieroglyphy. We hold this to be an impossibility. And if one or the other scholar of religion should succeed in giving us an exact description of the individual parts, and to refrain from the explanatory linking of these (not merely for the sake of the division of labour), then in our opinion this would be far too costly a price to pay for the good acquired by means of an "ideology-free" representation of the religious facts. No science should allow its hands to be tied in this way, since the goal of each must be the fullest possible knowledge of its subject. But to this also belongs a correct description of the whole of its historical development, and to this purpose, the individual facts are not only to be understood in their temporal succession, but also in a causal relation. In this, one may not even refrain from revealing those inner processes, corresponding to outer ones, that those who experience them directly cannot themselves give an account of, or which they usually interpret incorrectly during subsequent reflection. In all these tasks we move beyond description and make use of a procedure which in methodology is called "constructive synthesis".

We agree with the representatives of the above-mentioned view that the first duty of the religious researcher is to state the facts. But this does not mean that we have to agree with them that historical construction and the interpretation of the facts should be started only after all the facts have been brought to light and all doubts about them have been eliminated. The connection between the critical ascertainment of the factual and the structuring of it is

their field of study, for others that of placing their methodology on a par with that of the other sciences. Yet, on the one hand, the fact is often overlooked that every limitation placed on scientific research is merely a matter of expediency, while, on the other hand, an ideal is conjured up that is still far from reality. By this means, differences, which were purely incidental at first, are elevated to become opposites – an aggravation from which science never benefits.

far from arbitrary. Further, the various groups of facts immediately appear in the form of series, some running in part along parallel lines, and it would require an unnatural act of self-denial not to bring these series together or at least to bring their individual members into that relation to each other which we call history. That which belongs together in the factual world, one should not put asunder in the analysis.

The fewer concessions that are made to the emerging Science of Religion, the farther its recognition as an independent science alongside those of language, law, etc. appears to be. Thus, its alleged inability to achieve in its field anything analogous to what other sciences have already accomplished in theirs in fact disguises the interdiction to make religion the object of scientific knowledge: With regard to religion, science should limit itself to description, and should refrain from attempting to explain. What does this signify other than having the study of religion stop at a boundary beyond which it would just begin to exercise a higher appeal? Thus, either one does not notice the contradiction in demanding that the facts of religion be merely described, or there is a tacit desire to protect religion from profanation, as if applying the usual methods of research to religious facts would desecrate it. Of course, we have no illusions about the current state of research. We cannot see, however, why a different measure should be applied here than, for example, in Linguistics, in which enough moments of a not purely descriptive kind were already taken into account in the description of the facts, long before this science had reached its present perfection. On the other hand, we may not share this concern about profanation and, even if there were worrying indications – at least in the estimation of certain individuals – we would not derive from this any objection to the cultivation of studies that are based on facts and seek to discover their hidden foundations.

We had to declare as insufficient and self-contradictory an undertaking in which only the description of the individual religions is taken into consideration, while their very history and processes of development are neglected. After all, specialization, of the kind we call for here, has its great advantages over the other extreme, whereby one presumes to know something about everything, but knows nothing about anything sufficiently. Seemingly universalistic, such a procedure is in truth the greatest superficiality, and by comparison, observation confined to a narrow circle of facts is far more likely to give insight into the driving forces of religion. Specialization is undoubtedly the strength of this as of all knowledge. The only distinction to be made is between the task to be performed by the individual researcher and the task of the research in general. For the former, even today there can hardly be a better maxim than the Platonic εἶς ἐν κατὰ φύσιν, and quite unpredictable benefits arise from the distribution of tasks within one and the same field of work, both for the individual workers and for the work as a whole, both on a small and on a large scale. In the object of research itself, however, in so far as we understand by that the goal toward which the research proceeds, quite aside from the paths that lead there, it is not a matter of separating what belongs together by the nature of the matter and by virtue of the knowledge being pursued.

However, this does not mean that everything has the same significance for knowledge, nor that what is most indispensable for us is also the most valuable. We consider the gaining of historical knowledge of the religion of a single people, whether it is acquired from literary or other sources, with or without consideration of its external forms, to be undoubtedly the precondition for the extension of such knowledge. But it does not come into our minds to make the indispensable the only thing, beyond which there is nothing else for us to do.

Not directly, but through a series of intermediate links, the research drive rises from the nearest to the farthest. First and foremost, religion is never found in isolation. It is connected, above all, with the entire culture of its people. The history of religion (taking this name in its original meaning) should therefore always recall the conditions under which it encounters its material, the religious life of a people, especially when isolation seems useful for reasons of expediency. Such a history of religion can, accordingly, take further cultural factors into consideration to which religion is related, and it will always do so in the more outlying areas of religion, where, of course, all the other areas of cultural life also have more influence. Isolation seems to be more excusable, though no less harmful in its consequences, when it is limited to understanding religion as a reflection of the character of a people, as revealed in their language, laws, and so on. Now, however, we cannot know a priori whether a people in its religion or in its culture in general has undergone influences from other peoples with a different culture and religion, and even where such are proven for one aspect of the cultural life, a relationship of dependence with regard to the others does not yet follow. But since at least the possibility of influence cannot be denied, each individual case must be examined on its own merits. The historian who seeks to consider the religion of one people separately from that of the neighbouring peoples runs the risk of distorting historical developments, and thus, for this reason also, the specialist would be ill-advised who believed that he could confine himself to his immediate object of investigation.

Both the forms of isolation touched upon here relate to the study of the religion of a people as an entity set apart from other peoples. But who guarantees that this unity is original? Could it not also have emerged via the division of an earlier, more comprehensive unity? Here, therefore, it would be contrary to the purpose of knowledge itself if one were to seek to artificially ward off the light that such a primal unity of religion may continue to shed, however sparsely, upon the religions of individual peoples.

Even in this comparison, as one can see, the boundaries of kinship are preserved. Why, however, may not unrelated religions be compared, always respecting, of course, the rights of each religion to be studied in its historical and pre-historical contexts and never to be conceived and judged otherwise than in this view? For the fact that we are venturing out onto a shoreless sea without a rudder or compass is not self-evident to us from the outset, and in fact the contrary is the case, as will be explained below. We would only like to emphasise here that it seems to us to be the obligation of research to leave no means untried, whose proper use may be connected with hope of providing significant knowledge of its

subject. If, therefore, the nature of religion is brought only a little closer to our understanding by the comparison of unrelated religions, we do not disdain this aid.

For the sake of this comparison, which goes beyond the framework of historical observation, and whose results can perhaps be supplemented with the adduction of psychological observations, we will refrain from using the term “history of religions” in such a modified sense, but rather determine to adopt the term “Science of Religion” [*Religionswissenschaft*] for the totality of studies which have to do with religions and religion. History is without doubt also a science, when pursued with a scientific spirit and scientific method, though history is not all of science. The history of religion would be a study of culture [*Kulturwissenschaft*], to the extent that it conforms to the ideal we form of it. And while this ideal demands the work of a specialist, it simultaneously reveals to the researcher the overall context, thus teaching him, already from the historical perspective, to adopt a point of view from which it is no longer difficult to believe in a general history of religion, the true correlate of a general cultural history of which the history of religion is a part. And yet there is no great abyss between the general in the historical sense and the general in the comparative sense. They are already connected by methodology, since we have seen that even in the history of religion a proper comparative activity can successfully participate in the solution of specific problems. In terms of substance, therefore, they are not different things, but one and the same, examined in the one instance more with regard to its conditions of origin and its relationship to temporal and spatial influences and in the other more with regard to its characteristics and manifestations. Whether we should subsume the latter kind of scientific activity, or more correctly the sum of activities which, combined with the former, form a more and more complete whole of scientific knowledge of religion, into a general cultural science or otherwise, will depend mainly on two considerations.

First of all, what extension we give to the concept of culture. The beginnings of culture are lost in unfathomable darkness, and nowhere are we able to draw a sharp line between natural life and cultural life, natural community and cultural community, since the latter means nothing more than a higher level of welfare [*Lebensfürsorge*] and the associated degree of civilization. Nevertheless, the difference is substantive. Is the study of religion now to ignore everything that lies beyond the barely discernible border that separates the absence of culture from culture? Or, on the contrary, is it not more likely that it overlooks what is in fact a cultural product precisely because of the difficulty of clearly distinguishing this boundary? But since Ethnology has familiarised us with tribes which, relatively speaking, exist on the level of nature, would it not be a one-sided exaggeration, an overestimation of history for history’s sake, to blame the scholar of religion for doing something unscientific if he were to pay attention to the religious beliefs and customs peculiar to such a tribe? No one can argue that they are not worthy of serious study because of their crudeness, or that they are not worthy of scientific study because of the impossibility of historical treatment.

If, on the basis of this consideration, an appropriate classification does not yet present itself to us, since any such classification would obviously resist subordinating the Science of Religion to Ethnology and hence to Anthropology, then a further consideration provides greater assistance. This assumes that the Science of Religion, whether it proceeds purely historically or concerns itself with the contrary side, the observation of characteristics and states of affairs, whether it moves along historical or ethnological paths, is dependent on the services of Psychology – if not in the collection of facts, which is merely a preparatory activity, but as soon as it begins to interpret them. The fact that Psychology, for its part, also uses findings from the Science of Religion to expand its field, that both disciplines in fact interact with each other, need not trouble us further here. It is sufficient to recall the fundamental importance of Psychology for the Science of Religion in order to immediately find an appropriate means of subsuming the latter. If Psychology, because its objects are mental processes which are observed without any consideration of their contexts in the specific fields of intellectual life, deserves the title of general humanities [*allgemeine Geisteswissenschaft*], then the Science of Religion is, for the reason just given, one of the specific humanities of the mind [*spezielle Geisteswissenschaften*]. It is one of the empirical humanities and may be counted among the historical disciplines. For even those facts thanks to which one might be inclined to relate it to Ethnology are connected with the historical facts and point too clearly to a development from which they emerged or into which they entered as determining factors for it to seem advisable to break this connection.

As in the other humanities, which either concern the mental processes as such or take the various products of mental activity as their object, it is that which is given to experience that serves as the starting point of enquiry in the Science of Religion. But it does not consider this equally from its subjective and its objective side. It is not interested in religion as a problematic disposition, nor as an aggregate of purely psychological and therefore merely individual experience, but in religion in the sense of a mental fact that enters into the external world [*eines in die Aussenwelt tretenden geistigen Faktums*]. In our view, which the empirical tendency of the Science of Religion appears to require, “religion” is an expression for a class of empirical facts. Religion denotes a general concept that always refers to experience. Religions only exist for us in empirical terms, and, strictly speaking, as many exist as there are individuals who are capable of religion, although our science, like every science, can make only limited use of this fact. The general category of religion only acquires its substance through the work of thought in determining the essence of religion in conceptual terms, which itself is not possible without precise observation of the actual. Nothing, therefore, would be more harmful to our understanding than to establish a preliminary abstraction by means of a definition justified by no more than a cursory glance at the historical religions and one or two psychological commonplaces. The danger, however, of misjudging the facts themselves, of overlooking religious materials or of confusing matters of a non-religious nature for religious ones is merely fictitious. And if this danger is real, could a definition, a

mere formula, protect us from harm? All that is absolutely indispensable to the undertaking is possessed by those who are capable of making scientific observations, partly by means of experiences accessible to all, from which we have no reason to exclude the religious, partly by means of the universal principles by which facts are established.

The tasks of the Science of Religion are thus to be pursued in the same direction as those of the other sciences of the mind. Therefore, the approach to be adopted in the Science of Religion cannot differ significantly from the method that is otherwise customary. What is true is that, in the pursuit of the special tasks that the Science of Religion has to solve, some specific method, such as comparison, will be used more in one field and less in another.

I.

Of the developments to which the history of religion in the narrow sense directs its attention, not all are completely alike. While many return regularly at certain times or for certain reasons, others occur only rarely and sporadically. The former, when they occur among individuals who have acquired through intercourse a uniformity in the manner of making their inner states known to the outside, we call customs. We distinguish between religious customs – according to the extent of the community that determines them – that belong to the people and those that belong to an individual professional class (priests, etc.), although the latter can also be received by outsiders. In the case of the latter, the regulatory or statutory prevails, in the case of the former, the customary. However, religious customs fall within the scope of historical research both in themselves and also insofar as they are subject to change within the basic type. Yet the history of religions is not exhausted in the study of customs. For one thing, because it is not only the external manifestations of specific ideas, feelings, desires, etc. that deserve attention, but also internal states, for all that these cannot dispense with, at least in part, embodiment in that which we call custom.

The religious customs of others would be an unknown thing to us if we were not able, at least by analogy, to put ourselves in the position of imagining the operation of the ideas they express. It goes without saying that this insight can in no way be acquired through general conceptual schemes. A further reason why the history of religion also has to consider other processes arises from the observation that significant individuals or similar bodies (orders of priests, schools of theology, etc.) often intervene in a decisive way in religious life, just as in politics, so that processes whose functioning depends entirely on their regular recurrence cease to have significance for them. Regardless of whether the facts and events appear to be separate from this individual, who thereby acts only together with many others, or whether they receive their character through the personality: The highest principle for the scholar of religion is not to take an interest in all facts, but only in those that are historically significant. Accordingly, the history of religion must begin with a *s e l e c t i o n* of what is valuable for the course of historical development from the material at its disposal.

The material of the history of religion extends as far back as any tradition that brings us news of the past. At the point where the tradition ceases, history ends for us. Whatever lies beyond this boundary – and who would claim that history begins only with tradition? – has no historical value precisely because we can know nothing about it. Beyond the terminus from which it would be permissible to date history, and which we allow to coincide with the beginning of tradition, we lose ourselves in prehistoric times. The material that these provide for the study of religion must be distinguished from the actual history of religion.

But even tradition can only be regarded as a reliable witness to the past from the point at which it was fixed in written form. No matter how important one may consider the use of writing to be, it is always left to oral tradition to fill in large spaces in our historical image. However, the use of scripture for religious purposes, in order to establish a systematic order for religious customs – which had, until that point, been more or less unregulated – and the ideas on which they were based, and to endow them with authoritative validity, is not even the earliest; and though the religious formulas, songs, rules, etc., which are first handed down orally, then in writing, make up the religious literature, the higher we ascend into the past, the more rarely do they contain a reminder of facts about the history of religion.

To select the historically significant facts from the scanty and frequently distorted traditions of the earliest times which monuments of a religious nature have left us is therefore tantamount to applying the probe of criticism to the traditions themselves. For only what can pass this test will be regarded as historically significant, and since vanishingly few genuine historical facts remain, these may all appear to us to be especially worth knowing. With the increase of reliable material, the historian's position in relation to his material changes, and it would certainly be inexpedient for him to attempt to treat everything factual as a historical peculiarity.

Besides selecting the genuinely valuable facts from the totality of those that have been handed down, which is guided by the proper historical understanding and always gives an account of the rationale behind the selection, it is important to present them as exactly as possible in the relations they originally possessed to each other. The historian of religion must therefore arrange the facts according to their internal or external relationships, so that their connection in the course of the history of religion may be clearly recognised, and to determine the main factors in the historical process which he seeks to bring closer to the understanding by means of careful analysis. In the performance of this task, he naturally has no help to expect from those who once witnessed this process. For whenever one moved from the transmission of individual documents to the processing of the reported actions to create a general picture, the original intention was always to proclaim the fame of one hero or another or his lineage through these deeds. Of the history of religion, however, except where, as is partly the case for the Egyptians, Israelites, and Indians, it was associated with an official priestly history, relatively little belongs to the chapter of the glorious deeds of mankind. Just like language, which is spoken, lives and dies when it ceases to be spoken,

religion too, as long as it was practised, was a high and supreme thing for humans, and only rarely was there occasion to recall the developments from which it grew, or to give others an account of them, and even less to worry about their past. And even where this did happen, one was content to emphasise individual facts, whereas no attention was paid to the main thing, the internal development.

If the history of religion is to be approached in the spirit of modern research with a prospect of success, regardless of the fragmentary state – both in number and quality – of the available sources, this presupposes first of all the renunciation of all hopes and wishful thinking, so that no harm is done in any way to the facts. The conviction must not even be entertained that religion per se or a specific religion of this or that kind has a claim to real existence outside of abstracting and isolating thought. In actuality, only the concrete religious facts exist, and even these only in and through individuals who possess unlimited possibilities to change themselves according to the endless variations of life's conditions, in their intercourse with each other and with the physical environment which surrounds them. Therefore, as often as one is confronted with a religious fact, a p r o c e s s in the living history of religion, one must keep in mind that this process must never be taken by itself, but, by his nature, the human individual stands in spatial and temporal or causal relations to similar or dissimilar processes – which, in the case of other human individuals, we may reduce to facts of consciousness, and to the extent that this is not the case, for which we must presuppose the unconscious external world. However, this does not have to be explicitly emphasised in every representation. It is sufficient that the basic conception retains a realistic character. Then, without precisely weighing every word, it will *eo ipso* reveal its true meaning to everyone without difficulty.

Furthermore, the history of religion, in order not to confuse the real event with one that is merely supposed, cannot be sufficiently on its guard against the danger of using a false explanatory principle or of making a false use of a correct one. One false explanatory principle is the assumption of a primordial period of the formation of religions, from which those similarities in the religions are derived that have been preserved by peoples without any d e m o n s t r a b l e original linguistic connection. For the explanation for such agreements will never be found in this fictitious assumption, but only in one for which the historical time known to us provides the empirical data. Excessive zeal particularly likes to make false use of the genealogical explanatory principle, which, borrowed from a neighbouring field (language), where it has – naturally within certain limits – been applied to good effect, has not rarely been adapted to fundamentally different circumstances.

On the other hand, under no circumstances should a limit be imposed on supplementing the given by means of further conclusions. For without the addition in thought of that which is not directly given to that which is given as a cause or effect, a causal connection could never be established, and yet this is the essence of the historical perspective. From the simplest construction, carried out as if unconsciously, which helps us to recognise evidence of an

occurrence as a historical fact, to the complicated task of situating such an event in the whole to which it belongs and finding out which general views (and customs) have conditioned it or, conversely, have been changed by it over time, everything is based on such conclusions. To ensure, however, that this joining of one fact with another (constructive synthesis) does not degenerate into mere arbitrary combinations, all possibilities must first be examined. And only after one has determined the degree of probability of each is one able to say with certainty why only one such conjecture is permissible. It would be preferable to renounce the establishment of a causal relation, for all that the human spirit desires to do so, than to assert such a connection on the basis of insufficient or inadequate reasons and to induce the belief that there are reasons which recommend precisely one assumption with the exclusion of all others. Apart from the fact that there may be no causal connection at all between the facts to be investigated, so that their coexistence is merely coincidental, even where there is a causal relation, several ways of linking them are always conceivable and have equal rights as long as it has not been possible to eliminate all but one of them as incompatible with other facts, or at least to establish a prevailing probability for one of them. We must therefore reckon with the possibility, until we have proof to the contrary, of a merely coincidental relation in all instances of agreement, which we can easily establish by comparing objects of faith and worship, ideas, customs, etc. The huge variety of beliefs and customs spread over the globe and common to the most diverse peoples does not provide us with the slightest indication to prove a historical connection. For under identical or analogous conditions of life, identical or analogous phenomena also appear in individuals and peoples who have no intercourse at all with one another. Attentive observation, understanding each of these phenomena in relation to the whole to which it belongs, will of course not fail to notice the numerous small-scale divergences, despite all the agreements at the large, but these exist merely side by side, without one fact being the cause of the other, or both having a common cause. In addition, there are also enough moments of agreement for which a causal connection can be assumed, but where we must protect against considering the one cause found to be the sole determining factor. If, for example, the religious ideas and customs of one people show an analogous development to those of another, and where the one people can be shown to have influenced the other or both to have been influenced by a third, this does not mean that very similarity in the religious history of the two peoples can be traced back to mutual influence or to influence emanating from the third.

Rather, a special examination is required for each individual case, since circumstances may arise in the one case that are absent in the other, and favour the assumption of a causal connection here, while they exclude it there. For all cases, however, and in all up to the determination of their complete content, we make use of the comparative method. The history of religion specifically makes use of it wherever, within a people as a whole, similarities can be observed in this or that manifestation of religious ideas, desires, aspirations, and so on. Besides ascertaining the facts, the purpose of the comparison here is

to determine the historical relationships among the various classes and individuals involved in the religious culture of this people and to identify the share that individuals or interested classes have in the work of assimilation. The situation is quite analogous where similarities emerge among disparate peoples. Here the aim of the comparison is to determine what relations entail between the one people and the other, in order thereby to recognise in what direction and to what extent a transference or influence has taken place. The task is different when there seem to be reasons to postulate an original tribal community as the cause of the correspondences among several peoples. In this case, the comparison serves to reveal the cause that no longer exists empirically, from which the existing correspondences have been derived. However, in order that such a reconstruction does not produce an empty and nebulous image or result in an empty concept such as that of an Indo-European or Semitic primal religion, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the conditions that apply to the specific cultural area to which these investigations extend.

Comparison also proves an invaluable tool for understanding the work of those figures who, in the history of religions, have received the attribute of a founder of a religion, reformer, teacher, etc. Here one is often confronted with the question: Was it due to the circumstances of the time, local conditions, etc. that their appearance bore its unique character, or did it arise from their unique qualities, or was it even based on a conscious intention? In order to answer these questions, one is well advised to consider similar cases and to examine whether they are more likely to result from the given circumstances, from the individual nature and disposition, or from the presence or absence of an intention.

Comparison is also of considerable service to us in considering, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the similarities in the way, as a result of the social community, a larger or smaller number of individuals give expression to their inner states. In applying this to the facts and phenomena of intellectual life, of which we are curious to know whether we may regard them as regularly recurring in a totality of individuals, it has to perform more or less the same service as the procedure described by J. St. Mill as the method of agreement (*Logik*, translated by Th. Gomperz II, p. 81). For, similar to the determination of a law of nature, we consider only individual cases but select those that are different in all other circumstances except for one, in order to determine that it is precisely by this that the phenomenon is conditioned, that it follows a rule in this and is therefore to be regarded as a custom and a view shared by many. Yet caution and circumspection are all the more necessary here, as the material available to the scholar in religion is only rarely complete, and it is even less clear how widely we have to draw the circle within which, and further with regard to which individuals, this correspondence really applies.

A tacit condition which we must always set, as often as we wish to establish a causal relation between different mental processes, or the subjects who experience them, is that they possess in the physical environment a medium both for exerting effects and for receiving them. For it is only indirectly that one mental process may trigger another of the same kind.

The interaction of different individuals can only happen by means of the physical (among which we may already include the expressions of language). In order to understand religious facts, and particularly all religious factors which are founded in the community and, conversely, which form the community, the natural side must therefore always also be taken into account. Only in this way can we understand how a smaller or larger number of individuals can influence each other and agree in their actions, intentions, and ideas.

After these general methodological remarks, we will now describe in more detail the ways in which the history of religion is approaching the goal of a complete knowledge of all relevant relationships. In accordance with the duality of historical facts (customs and the ideas with which they are associated, on the one hand, and the works of individuals, on the other), we have to keep two things apart, to distinguish, but not to separate: the history of religious customs and statutes, ideas and attitudes, etc., in short, the history of religious life and its manifestations, in the first instance, and the history of creative figures, their teachings and works, in the second.

II.

The first step in understanding history is to arrange the empirical record of religious life according to the order of space and time. Only in the case of contemporary religions do we possess precise information regarding their geographical diffusion. For these, we even possess a wealth of cartographic representations, which show with near certainty even those particular differences which we are accustomed to describing as denominations, sects, etc. The religious conditions of earlier times, however, can only be demarcated into regions and periods on the basis of painstaking historical research. For this geographical and chronological order, we always rely first on those surviving monuments whose age and origin we are able to determine. All other records are of secondary consideration and only insofar as they prove free of the suspicion of forgery by measurement against the former. The basic classification of religions, without which the grouping according to historical and genealogical aspects would be meaningless, is the geographical one. We resort to it as the most useful for the purpose of a provisional distribution whenever we want to give an account of the totality of all the religions of the earth. Yet even in this case, we cannot completely dispense with chronology, because it does occur that one religion disappears, and another prevails in the same country. However, we should note that by means of such spatial and temporal demarcation, which merely paraphrases the motley diversity of phenomena in a few rough lines, we have obtained only the most rudimentary outline. It may therefore be considered fundamental for research insofar as we have to start here, as everywhere, with such rude materials. On the other hand, for the history of religion itself, only that classification is of any value which tells us: here and not there, in this period and in no other, the religious life took one form or another. That this *suum cuique* obliges research to pay attention to the tiniest of differences is obvious. Within larger geographical areas, smaller ones may be identified, to which particular and distinct religious states of affairs, identifiable by means of their distinct

characteristics, may correspond. Establishing a chronological record of religious expressions for these specific areas is of particular benefit to research. Just as the plant and animal organism is composed of a multitude of cells, so the uniting of many spatially and temporally ordered states of religion [*Religionszustände*] forms the basis of our knowledge of humanity's religious life.

If it is possible to produce evidence of a chronology and, moreover, there is no reason to believe in a sudden and violent relocation of the population of the area in question, then the conditions are given under which we would expect to encounter a historical relationship. But it will be the business of a more exact investigation to ascertain, by comparing the one form [*Gestalt*] with the other, whether the later state of religion has arisen from the earlier, that is, whether the latter is the natural preliminary stage of the former. And conversely, the further the elements to be compared move apart in space and time, and this is something we face whenever we try to prove a historical connection between states of religion from different spaces and times, the more obscure become the relationships and every other evidence that we need for this purpose. Where they do exist and have been established, it is nevertheless not easy to determine with certainty whether and to what extent such similarities in different times and regions, whether in relation to individual phenomena or to general religious states, are due to borrowing or to an original religious community.

Yet our desire for knowledge is not satisfied with the determination of the historical context alone. We therefore take a further step by considering the p r o c e s s of development or the continuous sequence of interdependent facts. Mere records alone are not sufficient for this purpose, since they are never given to us in a complete and unbroken chain. We must supplement them in many instances by drawing rational conclusions. Thus, we make accessible, by analogy with facts whose relationship to one another we may know with certainty by means of comparing earlier and later states, facts that are only inadequately accessible to us. In this way, we can draw conclusions about one religion based on another. By comparing related forms of different religions that belong to an earlier stage, we are able to reconstruct the basic form from which they emerged and, under certain circumstances, thereby go beyond the historical record. When, in one and the same religion, we recognise one of several coexisting forms of belief and ritual as the original, we are likewise making use of historical construction. Without the formation of h y p o t h e s e s, any insight into the course of history would therefore be closed to us. Wherever and to the extent that gaps remain in what is given to experience, we have, namely by virtue of the unity of our knowledge, a right to form hypotheses. This also entails that the hypothesis has nothing whatsoever to do with the intuitions of the imagination and does not wish to serve anything other than logic. We form hypotheses, i.e., we make assumptions that are not directly given as facts nor indirectly given by evidence, but must be based on the facts in order not to be arbitrary fictions.

At the various stages of a religion's development, we encounter similarities in the various manifestations, which we must examine in order to find a common formula, rule or law. Such a law of this kind would state that within a certain area and a certain period of time, processes in religious life correspond to each other in such a way that every time one occurs, another is likely to accompany it. We say "likely" since we can only comprehend natural events and predict them in advance from their conditions of origin where we possess them in their entirety. Where mental forces are at work, however, we can only indicate the direction in which they should act according to the motives known to us, but not that they must act in this particular direction, if they act at all. If, according to the law of causality, every event has its cause, this does not mean that everything must happen for which there is a cause. This peculiarity of mental processes must also be taken into account when it comes to the facts of history. Within these limits, that is, taking into account not only the varying inner and outer conditions, for the sake of which all historical laws are only empirical laws, whose validity is measured at the limits within which they were observed, but also because of this peculiarity of the mental, it is possible to speak of regularity with regard to the processes of religious history. There is no process in religious life that could not have been omitted, and neither are we able to give the reason why at that time precisely this phenomenon occurred in this area, unless we relate it to other simultaneous phenomena in the same area; though, admittedly, this does not really explain it. But every attempt to use one or the other of the diverse inner and outer conditions to explain the peculiarities in the customs and views of the different religions, be it what is called the character of a people, its genius, be it climate and soil conditions, be it contacts and mixtures of different forms of worship and belief, has ended with the result that the problem is not solved. We set this matter aside for later investigations, which psychological analyses will provide.

The form of a religion changes. The old perishes and the new emerges either through a process of transformation which is only visible in its consequences, and which encompasses *nomina et numina*, or through the observable reception of the new in place of the old, the latter being cast off. Chronologically, the former process is difficult to determine. For the latter, on the other hand, we have more evidence in the sources, at least for establishing a relative chronology. As a rule, the sources merely state when a new belief, custom, etc. existed, but rarely or never when it came into being, apart from the fact that it is often in the interest of the sources to ignore the existence of the new element far beyond the time of its first appearance. Some things for which evidence only emerges later may therefore be older than others for which we have earlier evidence. A judgement on this is only possible after a thorough examination of the sources. Often, light is shed on the religion in question from other related or unrelated religions. We are thus again dependent on comparison in the questions under consideration here. The sources have even less reason to mention the extinction and end of forms, and ultimately the only way this can be detected is by the fact that their influence changes or ceases, which can be determined to some extent

chronologically. New creations, as distinct from those that simply took the place of something that had gone before, not only launched the process of religious development, but repeatedly intervened in its course. In no way does everything in the history of a religion follow on from one another. The birth of one does not always mean the death of the other. On the contrary, at more than one point we see new shoots grow without the old being lost, sometimes in imitation of and analogous to the foreign, sometimes by borrowing from another religion, sometimes as a result of a personality that draws from the depths of its spiritual consciousness. As one might expect, the particular conditions under which new creation or transformation takes place are far from constant. But they always appear motivated by the intellectual and moral needs of those who use them as spiritual leavening agents.

If the historical approach means we have to look at everything in religion from the point of view of development, we must nonetheless not disregard the fact that the concept of development needs the concept of persistence as its complement. In other words, not everything is change and not everything is persistence, but the historical process is conditioned by both, by a conservative element and one that is subject to change. In religion, we prefer to give the former the name of "tradition". The holiness attributed to it and the tendency to associate it with the most distant past emphasises in the historical process the feature of persistence or continuity as a result of which we ascribe it with value for civilization – yet all persistence has value only when it also possesses the inherent adaptability to the changing external conditions of life. What we say of religion in general, we of course wish to say of everything that belongs to its repertoire. In everything we have to ask about the antecedents – those of religion will always contain some kind of religious 'plasma' – and we must not rest until we have found out what is in fact primary in every religious belief and custom. However, we would like to counter one misconception here. It is true that in the history of religion, at the large as at the small scale, everything is subject to the general law of causality; nevertheless, precisely because it is a question of human development, it can by no means be fully comprehended in what we call the type. Individuals compete here, as in every human development, and, at first perhaps only a little, but later more and more clearly, free will gains a formative and constitutive influence on its environment. The dominance of the individual over the general can culminate in emancipation. This gives rise, in the life of the history of religion, to the most diverse deviations from the type, and only once these have been recognised does the religious scholar believe that he has accomplished his task.

Wherever free will asserts its right alongside determinism, it can also assert itself against determinism; and this illuminates the fact that progress does not necessarily proceed continuously from the less perfect to the more perfect, but that, in the history of religions, regression is not uncommon. At the same time, in the one case as in the other, we should not overlook that in speaking of progress or regression we are already making value judgements, even if the norm they are based on is derived from the course of historical development itself.

The history of religion, like the history of art, the history of literature, the history of science, cannot fail to draw into its field of investigation personalities whose work has often left traces far beyond their immediate environment. It thus becomes biography in that higher sense of the word, which understands by life all emanations of spiritual power and charisma, the words and works of man. It draws its knowledge of these personalities from their own records, if they have left any, or from the records or orally transmitted accounts of their immediate followers; records left by a later generation may also serve as a source, if their credibility can be proven by external or internal means. Testimony that comes from the opposing side is thus not worthless for research, but often reflects impressions that were not registered by the friends and followers of ones so adulated. Even where they exaggerate on the unfavourable side, they may contain a historical core that one only needs to prise out to benefit from. Nor should one ignore the connection between the life and activity of the personality in question and the religious and cultural life of his or her age; sometimes even political history makes a valuable contribution to understanding or at least towards better appreciating the particular direction history took.

Everything that takes us back to the world of ideas that surrounded such a figure, that leads us into the workshop of his mind or into the depths of his spirit, represents an essential moment in the reconstruction of events. Dissolution into the elements of which it consists is also the means in this case to achieve a proper synthesis, an image of history that corresponds to reality. First and foremost, that which is unique must find adequate expression. For this purpose, the main task of research is to select from the mass of details available, by comparison, those that coincide and group them accordingly. In this way, we separate the essential from the non-essential and discover the source from which everything flows. But no one can delve into other peoples' idiosyncrasies without their own spiritual experience. Merely to avoid carrying over anything of one's own into the other's character, one must also be aware that every character has its secrets that no one may fathom. Above all, we must not overlook this fact, that it is out of the question to consider the religious life and the personalities who give it its character separately. All understanding is here also a being understood. In the historical account, therefore, one side, which we shall call the personal side, must not be treated in isolation as a separate entity, but only in the closest connection with the other side.

The comparison used so far is entirely in the interest of historical research. Even where we use it to establish the similarities that occur among different peoples, it maintains the historically verifiable or reconstructable dependence in which one people stands to another or several to a central people from which they have branched off. In contrast to this historical-comparative method, another comparative method does not take historical circumstances into account at all. It considers instead all those agreements which have their source in human nature and is therefore called the anthropological-comparative method.

This method is no longer limited to the religions of peoples related by genealogy and language but has a range that extends as far as to consider the ideas and customs of the primitive peoples [*Naturvölker*]. For the rest, it seeks to serve the description and explanation of facts just as much as its twin sister, the historical-comparative method. While the former arrives at empirical laws of limited validity, should it succeed in proving the religious development of a (relatively) small area to be in one respect or another governed by law, the latter also seeks to attribute such phenomena and changes in religious life, which are not bound to any place or time, to laws. However, this goal does not appear to have been achieved if it operates only with the most common generalities, which are so obvious as not to require formulation in the form of laws. Rather, it is laws alone that can both stimulate our curiosity and satisfy it, i.e., such generalities in which the essence of religion, its development and formation, becomes apparent to us. In the case of all these generalisations, which are based on induction, the study of religion must of course take no other paths than those which have been tried and tested in the exact sciences. Their laws will therefore only meet the requirements to which scientific laws are subject when they owe their existence not to what we wish were the case but to methodical research alone. Comparative Anthropology provides us with striking proof of the principle that the wish is the father of the thought, in its often starkly contradictory ways of understanding religious facts. This shortcoming is not directed against the method itself, but against the strong tendency to apply it using previously formed opinions, whereby, of course, one always reads out of the facts precisely what one has previously read into them. Yet for all that the historical method is not immune to influences that should remain forever distant from historical reflection, at least its facts permit verification by every competent observer, since they have mostly been handed down in unambiguous form and are sufficiently confirmed. To make use of this advantage of the historical method, the aim must be to transform anthropological facts into historical ones as far as possible. This can be done by producing the documents that are still missing, by organising and continuing for a longer period of time records by an expert hand, which make the religions of the non-literate peoples the subject of an observation that also takes into account the processes of transformation. That is why the religions of the civilised peoples [*Kulturvölker*] are the skeleton of the Science of Religion and remain its most important part as long as there are primitive peoples [*Naturvölker*] living alongside civilised peoples, or peoples whose religious ideas are still beyond the reach of the historical method. On one point, however, the difference between the two approaches recedes completely, insofar as both methods cannot work without an unprejudiced psychological interpretation, which, by casting its unshaded light down into the depths of religious consciousness, makes the development easier for us to understand. With psychology, of course, we do not have in mind a so-called psychology of common sense but only the scientific and empirical one. With regard to the position, we grant it, we find a parallel to it only in philology. Reserving for later an exposition of the principles of scientific psychology as applied to the study of religions, we conclude this discussion of the methodology of the historical study of religions by indicating

the reason why we have not specifically emphasised the “philological” in the name of our method. This reason is none other than that we believe we may compare it to the hand as the ὄργανον ὀργάνων just as psychology may be compared to light, which according to the Aristotelian way of speaking makes τὰ δυνάμει ὄντα χρώματα in a certain sense into ἐνέργεια χρώματα (de anima III, 5, p. 430a 16-17).

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