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Religion: Historical Fact or Interpretive Theory? A Response to Hubert Seiwert

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For several reasons, I strongly welcome Hubert Seiwert's essay. He rightly warns – and powerfully argues (!) – against the growing marginalization of historical research in Religious Studies and the negligence of its relevance in the discourse on the discipline's self-understanding. I appreciate his epistemological approach of critical realism in as much as it gives due honour to facts (apart from which there could be no “empirical” understanding of the discipline), while at the same time paying equal attention to the human interpretive element in all perception and apperception of facts. He thereby provides and substantiates a strong alternative to anti-realist conceptions of the discipline such as the one expressed in Kocku von Stuckrad's dictum: “The goal of the academic endeavour is not to find the truth about the world, but to provide a space for public debate” (Stuckrad 2010, 167). In contrast, Seiwert is interested in truth, i.e. the difference between fact and fiction (213¹) – and I strongly endorse his corresponding fallibilism (213). But Seiwert seems to remain ambiguous on whether religion is part of the facts that are to be studied or not.

Seiwert, I think rightly, states that “what historians of religion study is not invented by them” (211). Yet is “religion” the object of their study? Seiwert holds that they study, interpret and explain “social realities” (208). Then what differentiates them from other historians? Historians of religion, he explains, study “imagination, institutions, practices, or social structures that are reconstructed by historical research as being ‘religious’” (211). But then, is this reconstruction as “religious” an “invention” or does it reflect a social reality? On the one hand, Seiwert apparently admits that the answer to this question does not depend on the existence of the concept “religion”. He cites Pascale Boyer that a syntax exists in languages which don't have a word for “syntax” (211) – and one could add that

1 All numbers in brackets refer to pages in Seiwert 2020.

“social realities” are realities even in those civilizations that do not have the concept of “social reality” (or “civilization”, “culture”, etc.). Moreover, he emphasizes that other religions do have conceptual variants of “religion” (214–16) – and again one could and should add that in the West, “religion” is far from being a stable homonymous and homogenous concept, but actually carries a rich variety of facets (as he indicates in fn. 5). So, does “religion” point to particular, non-invented parts or aspects of social realities that Religious Studies and the History of Religion should investigate and indeed explain? Here the ambiguities begin. On the one hand, Seiwert points out that historical research may shed significant light on how “religion” and its analogues were and are actually understood in other and/or past civilisations (214–17). This seems to suggest that various concepts of “religion” and their analogues belong to the non-invented, factual aspects of social life that the History of Religion studies. On the other hand, however, Seiwert is keen on removing “religion” from the objects of proper historical research to the domain of invented interpretive theories guiding such research.

With Roy Bhaskar, Seiwert holds that social realities have their own factual (“intransitive”) existence but can be observed only indirectly by their effects (220).² This realism, however, is somewhat mitigated by his triple distinction between the factual realities, their descriptions (“data”), and the “interpretation of the data”, a triad with an increasing degree of subjectivity (222f.). While Seiwert admits that social realities, despite their intransitive status, are also humanly produced (219), data and their interpretations belong to those human products which are in a sense more fallible. They belong to the “transitive” domain, inasmuch as data can be “disproved by empirical evidence” and as the interpretation of the data “rests on theoretical arguments” (223). The data depend both on the intransitive social reality and on the (fully?) transitive interpretive theories (223). “Religion”, according to Seiwert, belongs entirely to the domain of interpretation or interpretative theories. Hence, he asserts, we must not commit the “phenomenological fallacy” of transforming a theoretical concept “into a phenomenon, which is supposed to be a thing that exists independently of the discourses that conceptualise it” (231). But what then about past data (descriptions) and their past interpretations? Do they not belong to the factual intransitive social realities to which our current description (data) and interpretations refer? “The objects of empirical research in the human sciences are human beings, their behaviour and actions, and the totality of their material and immaterial products that have been created

² It is somewhat surprising that Seiwert does not recur to Karl Popper’s theory of “World 3”, which encompasses all products of the human mind, including its collective social or cultural products, but gains its objectivity by preceding the individual mind.

and accumulated throughout human history” (231). I agree. Yet human behaviour and human products clearly involve their understanding and interpretation of their behaviour. Human self-understanding, the interpretation of the world and our life in it, belong to a large extent to that kind of intransitive social reality which is not invented by the contemporary historian who studies it. And this includes that kind of human behaviour and corresponding self-understanding that we today, but also the people in the past, understood in some sense as “religious”.

Thus, if it is part of the history of religions (and religious studies more generally) to explain and analyse which kind of religion-concepts were (and are still) in use in human understandings of their personal, social and cosmic reality, religion-concepts (and their contents) are studied as part of intransitive social realities. I cannot see any “phenomenological fallacy” in that. The alternative would be to deny that human beings ever understood themselves in ways that we – and in some ways they themselves – see as “religious”, which is not very plausible. And if such studies into human self-understanding (as part of social realities) form an integral dimension of the history of religions, then it is only consistent to enter into broader comparative historical investigations exploring the range of similarities or conceptual overlapping within the field of such religious self-understandings. On that basis, it seems completely sensible to ask in what sense religion-concepts have been employed in human self-understanding, and whether from these some more general features of “religion” or “faith” may emerge. Such explorations could argue in favour of a common-core theory of religion (e.g. Davis 1989, 190–92). Or they could argue for a less or non-essentialist understanding of “religion” as a sort of polythetic cluster concept (e.g. Smart 1996, 8–14; Saler 2000, 158–196). In both ways, the discussion remains sensitive to historical findings, which is – if I am right – Seiwert’s main concern.

“The history of religion is the history of man”, said W. C. Smith some forty years ago. Historical observation, he claimed, has provided ample evidence that “faith [...] is an essential human quality” (Smith 1979, 129). If historical research finds that “religion” or “faith” (in Smith’s terminology, “faith” refers to the personal dimension of participation in religious or “cumulative traditions”) signify particular parts and aspects of social, or better human, reality – and they have often been used in one way or another to function as such a signifier – this finding virtually cries for an explanation. Why do human societies and human individuals display features that humans have referred to as “religion” or “religious” (in a sense that involves a broad scope of aspects of the concept but also significant commonalities) and continue to do so? As Seiwert states, the answer can be given in terms of “a deplorable delusion” or “a vital element of human existence”. In both ways, religion remains the explanandum. Any undogmatic form of reli-

gious studies should not a priori exclude one of these options. As a vital element of human existence, human self-understanding as religious may indeed exist because such self-understanding is not in toto illusory but broadly correct. If we still wish to explore reality (instead of promoting ideology), this option must be kept open. And if we are seriously interested in telling truth from fiction, our discipline should do its very best to shed some light on this big issue. Among else, this will be challenging, but also of considerable help to the religions as part of our contemporary global social reality (see Schmidt-Leukel 2016; 2020).

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