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What is Religion?

The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies

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Abstract

Religious studies cannot agree on a common definition of its subject matter. To break the impasse, important insights from recent discussions about post-foundational political theory might be of some help. However, they can only be of benefit in conversations about "religion" when the previous debate on the subject matter of religious studies is framed slightly differently. This is done in the first part of the article. It is, then, shown on closer inspection of past discussions on "religion" that a consensus-capable, contemporary, everyday understanding of "religion," here called Religion 2, is assumed, though it remains unexplained and unreflected upon. The second part of the article shows how Religion 2 can be newly conceptualized through the lens of Ernesto Laclau's political theory, combined with concepts from Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, and how Religion 2 can be established as the historical subject matter of religious studies. Though concrete historical reconstructions of Religion 2 always remain contested, I argue that this does not prevent it from being generally accepted as the subject matter of religious studies. The third part discusses the previous findings in the light of postcolonial concerns about potential Eurocentrism in the concept of "religion." It is argued that Religion 2 has to be understood in a fully global perspective, and, as a consequence, more research on the global religious history of the 19th and 20th centuries is urgently needed.

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Keywords

poststructuralism – Judith Butler – Ernesto Laclau – Benson Saler – Michel Foucault – eurocentrism – western concept of religion – critical theory – postcolonialism – definitions of religion – object of religious studies – historiography – discourse theory

Religious studies as "a study of religions academically legitimated in separate departments in modern western research universities" (Martin/Wiebe 2012: 588) has "religion" as its self-declared object or subject matter. Defining "religion" has been a major enterprise within the discipline right from the beginning, but, so far, without conclusive results. As Arthur L. Greil has put it: "It seems safe to assert that no consensus on a definition of religion has been reached and that no consensus is likely to be reached in the foreseeable future" (Greil 2009: 136). If it is unclear what "religion" is, then the question immediately arises about the scope of religious studies. With no consensus on its object, religious studies is challenged to provide a theoretical legitimation for its existence as an independent academic discipline theoretically (Fitzgerald 2000).

As the debate appears to have reached an impasse, it might be useful to look for alternative theoretical approaches. Critical theories based on post-structuralist and postcolonial approaches have already been broadly discussed within religious studies (King 2013). However, their explanatory potential is far from being fully explored. It will be argued that recent discussions about post-foundational political theory by Ernesto Laclau, combined with certain poststructuralist concepts of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, enable a fresh look at the object of religious studies. However, this is only possible, when the debate about "religion" is framed slightly differently, which is done in the first part of the article. The second part then suggests a theoretical framework that establishes "religion" as the historical subject matter of religious studies. The third part discusses the previous findings with regard to postcolonial concerns of potential Eurocentrism in the notion of "religion," and, in reply to this, argues for a consistent global and historical perspective. The conclusion looks very briefly at the potential consequences of these deliberations for empirical research.

1 New Framing of an Old Debate

Previous debates have often conflated the search for definitions of the common subject matter of religious studies with that for useful operational definitions

of religion with regard to concrete empirical research questions. However, it is helpful to differentiate between both perspectives, though they are closely interrelated. The following discussion will solely focus on the first perspective. There has been no lack of proposed solutions regarding the subject matter of religious studies, with three main strategies having been pursued. Firstly, there was and is the search for a scholarly definition of religion capable of commanding a consensus, which could serve to determine the discipline's subject matter. Secondly, there are time and again voices, which have become louder, that question if an explicit, definitive description of religion is needed in order to constitute the discipline of religious studies. A third position demands the complete forgoing of the concept of religion as an academic tool of analysis. It pleads, as a consequence, for the dissolution of religious studies as an independent academic discipline. Although none of the three strategies have met with anything near to a general acceptance within the discipline, there is, in my view, something to learn when each of their stated arguments is more closely considered. Revisiting these positions will show that they all, at least implicitly, assume the existence of a specific kind of religion" that they don't explain nor reflect upon any further. It will be argued that this unexplained "religion" is the de facto subject matter of religious studies, and that it is time to consider it more closely.

1.1 *The Search for a Definition of Religion Capable of Consensus*

Among the three strategies that have evolved to address the subject matter of religious studies, the search for a definition of religion capable of commanding a consensus is the most established. In every introduction to religious studies the innumerable attempts to define "religion" are discussed, which are mostly differentiated into essentialist and functionalist approaches. Alongside this, there is a broad consensus in the research field that the classical definitions of the past are not able to provide a basis today for the determination of the discipline's subject matter (McCutcheon 1997; McCutcheon 2001; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2007), regardless of sporadic, new proposals that repeatedly move in this direction (e.g., Sundermeier 1999; Riesebrodt 2007; Cox 2010).

1.1.1 Polythetic Definitions of Religion

In view of this unsatisfactory situation, increasingly in modern times, there have been attempts at definitions of religion whose central features seek to avoid being tied to normative theories, but rather move back to a formal nominalism. Here, a new form of an essentialist definition of religion is to be found, which avoids both the former philosophical-metaphysical foundations

and most of the connected religious implications of the classic definitions. An especially successful variant of this attempt to define anew is the polythetic definition (Southwold 1978; Smith 1982: 1-18; Wilson 1998; Saler 2000a; Kleine 2010). To date, the most comprehensive discussions of the research history and conceptual elaboration of this approach have been provided by Benson Saler (Saler 2000a; Saler 2008). Saler presents fifteen features of religion, in an additive approach, that "consists of all the features that our cumulative scholarship induces us to attribute to religion" (Saler 2008: 222). A key point is that not all fifteen elements need apply to a phenomenon in order for it to be defined by this designation of "religion." Furthermore, the list is open, so that further elements could be added from research, if so wished. The more elements that are applicable, the more "typical" they are of this model of identified "religion." For Saler, then, religion is a graded category. Just as in a group of tall people there are individuals of different size, or in a group of rich people there can be found individuals of varying wealth, so there can be more or less of religion (Saler 2000a: xiii-xiv).

An example of such a polythetic definition is found in the biological praxis of taxonomy, even though Wittgenstein's talk of family resemblances, somewhat mistakenly, is named as the origin (Needham 1975). The application of this as an established formal method of classification in the natural sciences is beyond question, though the criticism continually arises that casts doubts as to if such an open definition can be helpful for concrete religious studies research. Indeed, to my knowledge, there exists hardly any social-scientific or historical research material in religion that attempts to productively make use of a polythetic approach. A central problem is the lack of a clear demarcation of what is not religion, because a graded category approach cannot provide this (Lease 2000; Wiebe 2000).

The model displays a problem that features in all nominalist definitions. While the older definitions were comprised of assumed basic characteristics of religion, the nominalist definitions mostly only show that there are formal possibilities, which are able to encompass such heterogeneous phenomena like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in a definition. At this level of the argument, however, it remains unexplained as to where the employed elements receive their plausibility and, moreover, as to why it is at all meaningful or necessary to pool these under a common category.

This basic arbitrariness and unexplained empirical reference of the definition's elements are, in polythetic approaches, averted mostly through the establishment of certain prototypes. These prototypes are concrete exemplars which, according to the judgment of the scholar, are considered especially typical for the particular polythetic category. For Saler, "Judaism," "Christianity"

and "Islam" serve as such exemplars which, in each case, satisfy all fifteen elements. Even when Saler emphasises that it is not theoretically necessary, these exemplars generate de facto the individual elements for the polythetic definition, resulting in a structural circularity of the rationale.

Although "religion" is depicted here as a purely abstract and analytic-polythetic category, it receives a specific empirical reference by means of the prototype exemplars. This prevents a nominal arbitrariness in the defining of religion. It is to be expected, then, that Saler would discuss and lay fully open their construction.

Amazingly, it is exactly this that he does not do, rather the description of the exemplars' contents covers only a few pages and, in these, no secondary literature of religious and historical significance is cited (Saler 2000a: 208-212). This is because Saler assumes a consensual understanding of religion that lies concealed behind his prototypes, which is to be found in "western culture" and in which "western" scholars of religious studies participate. This general and self-evident understanding of religion, he holds, is at the same time so immediate that it evades critical academic reflection.

It is remarkable, furthermore, that the detailed critical discussion of Saler nowhere expressly criticises this central weakness of his approach, even where it deals explicitly with his prototypes (Lease 2000: 291; McCutcheon 2000: 300-301; Paden 2000: 307-308; Wiebe 2000: 318-319; Saler 2000b: 333). This postulated consensual understanding of religion from Saler, though, requires closer analysis. It is a matter here, in my view, of the "unexplained religion" of religious studies.

1.1.2 The "Unexplained Religion" of Religious Studies

As mentioned, for Saler "our most prototypical cases of religion" are "the Western monotheisms," by which are understood "Judaism," "Christianity" and "Islam" (Saler 2000a: 225). The defined contents of these "Western monotheisms" are directly assigned to the "western" anthropologist of religion and the "western" scholar of religion as a part of the process of socialisation. This key formative notion, together with that of a connected consensus of "many contemporary academic students of religion," brings Judaism and Christianity into the stated prototypes, which provide the polythetic model with their empirical reference (Saler 2000a: 199). Islam is added by Saler as a third prototypical exemplar, since it is looked upon also as "fundamentally Western," with its "theologies," "eschatologies" and "rituals," as well as mentioned "personages," all standing in close relationship to Judaism and Christianity (Saler 2000a: 212). He combines these three prototypical exemplars together, then, as the "Western monotheisms."

The main problem is that Saler neither directly substantiates this formative notion further nor clearly states which concrete tradition of Judaism, Christianity or Islam he has in mind. Even the talk of "Western monotheisms," from the viewpoint of religious studies, is far from undisputed (Bergunder 2006). Only in one place does he speak of "the 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' described in textbooks in comparative religion" without, however, citing an actual work (Saler 2000a: 212). This reference, though, shows that he brings together Judaism, Christianity and Islam in a specific comparative religion perspective. They are subject to the natural self-ascription of "religion." Yet, this is anything but natural, because central currents in Judaism (e.g., Kohen & Susser 2000), Christianity (e.g., Kraemer 1947) and Islam (e.g., Qutb 1981) expressly refuse to be "religion."

Because the researcher acquires the substantive contents of the prototypical "Western monotheisms" directly through the process of socialisation, they are not connected back to actual historical and discursive mediating agencies. They, thereby, evade verifiability and historical critique. Indeed, in one place, Saler writes that he wants his definition, with regards to the contents of Judaism and Christianity, to be understood likewise as polythetic (Saler 2000a: 209), in order to escape the criticism of an inappropriate standardization of these religions. Yet, he leaves it here with this statement, not naming the concrete prototypes for his polythetic definition, although his own approach makes this compellingly necessary. It seems that he relies again here on a direct, pre-reflective plausibility for his remarks.

In short, a general, consensus-capable, contemporary "western" understanding of religion is provided here, which exists within and outside the scholarly community. It possesses "an historical reality in Western experiences" (Saler 2000a: 256) and, thus, claims a strong empirical reference. Saler, though, does not examine this phenomenon empirically, but leaves it to the direct experience of the researcher while, at the same time, claiming that it is intersubjectively identical with the experience of other researchers. In view of the central significance of this aspect for Saler's approach, this lack of reflection is astonishing.

It is fascinating that this general, yet unexplained, understanding of religion is also continually drawn upon by classical definitions and their new formulations as a means of plausibility. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, Buddhism was for William James a religion because it belonged to the "systems of thought which the world usually calls religious" (James 1922: 31). In reasoning for his definition's criteria, he referred to "the usual associations of the word 'religion'" or what religion signifies "for common men" (James 1922: 37). Even James Leuba (Leuba 1912: 51)—from whom the legendary collation

of countless definitions of religion comes—in his critical discussion of the different definitions of religion of his time, used the argument that "the word 'religion' has, after all, a fairly well established meaning" to which definitions must be orientated. Similarly, in new definition proposals, which do not proceed along a polythetic direction, this unexplained religion is used as a means to argue plausibility (e.g., Riesebrodt 2007: 116; Snoek 1999: 328).

1.1.3 Explained and Unexplained Religion

It can be held that the previous definitions of religion, in particular the polythetic variant, know of two different kinds of "religion": explained and unexplained. In what follows, these are described as "Religion 1" and "Religion 2." The "explained" Religion 1 is to be found in the explicit definitions of religion in the field of religious studies and related academic disciplines. The "unexplained" Religion 2, on the other hand, is a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion. The praxis of defining shows, however, that Religion 2 is drawn on to legitimate the plausibility of Religion 1. This is especially the case in polythetic definitions of religion, where Religion 2 functions as a prototype. Religion 2 remains, nevertheless, largely unexplained and unexplored. However, in complete contrast to Religion 1, in regard to the features of its contents, it is widely regarded as capable of consensus and goes largely undisputed.

The crucial point is that the unexplained, yet consensus-capable Religion 2 emerges in both the other main strategies that propose a solution to the question of the subject matter in religious studies.

1.2 *The Rejection of an Explicit Definition of Religion*

The second main strategy bluntly questions the need for religious studies to have its own defined subject matter. It denies, also, that any problem exists with this. Representatives of this position are not always clearly identifiable because, for the most part, they do not take part in debates about defining the subject matter of religious studies. When they do explicitly speak out, then it is to say that just as literary scholars seldom define "literature," scholars of music seldom "music," and art historians seldom "art," there exists no real need for religious studies to determine a commonly agreeable definition of "religion" (Kippenberg 1983; Tweed 2006: 29-33). This position, of course, is intellectually unsatisfactory, because no academic discipline can easily hold an open claim to an abnegation of reflection. Furthermore, it is noticeable that, in the other named disciplines, there are very vigorous debates about definitions of their subject matter; they, also, have not been able to defer the question concerning a commonly acceptable definition of their subject matter.

Strictly speaking, the rejection of an explicit definition of the subject matter does not challenge the fact that an academic discipline needs its own particular subject matter. Rather, it contests that it must be explicitly defined from within. This means, however, in consequence, nothing more than "religion," as well as "literature," "music" and "art," all come to learn of their subject matter from outside their respective academic areas of research (Rüpke 2007: 26-27). Only in this way does the rejection of an explicit definition of the subject matter become a plausible position in academic discourse.

The interesting point, therefore, is that those who plead that religious studies does not need to define its subject matter, de facto from this assume that the unexplained Religion 2 can depict a suitable subject matter for the discipline.

1.3 *Dispensing with the Concept of Religion*

A third segment of religious studies scholars want to explicitly dispense with the concept of religion. This position, for example, has been vehemently represented by Timothy Fitzgerald. "Religion," he says, is "thoroughly imbued with Judeo-Christian monotheistic associations and world religions ecumenism" and inseparably bound to a Christian theological agenda (Fitzgerald 2000: 19). For this reason, "religion" is not meaningfully employable for other non-Christian contexts. In the course of colonialism it was newly "invented" for the colonised societies and then forced upon colonial cultures (Fitzgerald 2000: 8-9, 29-30). Fitzgerald pleads that "religion," as an independent academic category, be forsaken and be integrated into the concept of culture. He does not stand alone with this demand (Sabatucci 2000; Dubuisson 2003). Indeed, the question arises as to why the discipline should hold on to a concept that only spreads problems, and whose use supports the extremely dubious and irrational politicising of public knowledge (McCutcheon 1997; McCutcheon 2001). As a consequence, this is connected with a rejection of religious studies as an independent discipline (Fitzgerald 2000: 19-20) and, so, the question about the subject matter is no longer relevant.

This argument contains the positivist-inclining dictum that holds to the possibility of the autonomy of religious studies to define its own subject matter, i.e., attempting to define Religion 1 completely independently from Religion 2. This approach—mostly implicitly presupposed—underlies, to a great extent, the previously outlined discussions concerning the concept of religion. It is raised, generally, with reference to the American scholar of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith (Smith 1982: xi), who once wrote:

> There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative

> acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.

The most fundamental objection against Fitzgerald's proposal was the implication that religious studies has autonomous access to its subject matter. The critics argued that it is beyond the power of religious studies to renounce a concept of religion. Thus, David Chidester wrote:

> After reviewing the history of their colonial production and reproduction on contested frontiers, we might happily abandon religion and religions as terms of analysis if we were not, as the result of that very history, stuck with them. (Chidester 1996: 259)

With a similar choice of words, Richard King argued

> The idea that there are 'religions' out there in the real world is such an embedded part of our social imaginary that it seems premature to talk of abandoning the notion altogether. (King 2004: 256-7)

In brief, these critics question if religious studies possesses autonomous authority over its own subject matter but argue that "religion is a word within language whose use is not determined by scholarship but by the wider linguistic community" (Flood 1999: 63). It is noteworthy that Timothy Fitzgerald has apparently modified his position recently and also argued in exactly the same direction: "the proper study of 'religion' is the category itself in its discursive relationship to 'state,' 'politics,' 'secular,' 'sacred,' 'profane,' 'civility,' and 'barbarity' " (Fitzgerald 2007: 312). Even Russell McCutcheon sometimes hints at the importance of Religion 2. Of course, he is a strong advocate of Jonathan Z. Smith's approach and sees "religion" as "an aspect identified, for the purpose of our study, by the definition we as scholars choose to use, a definition that suits our purposes and our curiosities" (McCutcheon 2007a: 71). However, he describes the way of getting to a scholarly definition as a "work from the ground up: to take contextually and historically specific words and the concepts they entail, and retool them for use in studying diverse historical and geographic settings" (McCutcheon 2007a: 19), and he speaks of the need to explore the "the history of 'religion' " (McCutcheon 2007a: 15-19). With reference to Tomoko Masuzawa, he can even suggest, that "we ought to consider studying why naming part of the social world as religion has caught on so widely among diverse human communities, each with their own prior systems of self-designation, in just the past few hundred years" (McCutcheon 2007b: 976). This clearly acknowledges the importance of Religion 2 for getting to Religion 1.

1.4 *Unexplained Religion as the Undisclosed Subject Matter of Religious Studies*

From the debate on the abolition of the concept of religion, it is particularly evident that religious studies cannot decree autonomously on its subject matter. Religion 1 remains, when it wants to be plausible, bound to Religion 2.

Classical definitions of religion are today discredited because they are shaped by theological, philosophical or ideological interests, which religious studies no longer wants to reify. The attempt to evade these implications by seeking shelter in nominalist, polythetic approaches, in effect, leads to Religion 2 acting as the prototype that makes definition criteria plausible. Those who hold that religious studies does not require an explicit subject matter to ground its discipline also implicitly assume that Religion 2 is its actual object. Additionally, the discussion about the demand for a rejection of the concept of religion has shown that religious studies remains firmly attached to Religion 2.

Furthermore, it has become clear that Religion 2 remains largely unexplained and unexplored in religious studies discussions. At the same time, though, the possibility, in principle, of it providing a consensual definition and its meaning for the designation of the subject matter of religious studies is generally acknowledged.

Is the unexplained Religion 2 the undisclosed subject matter of religious studies? This is exactly what Arthur Greil (2009) has recently claimed without, though, working it out in any detail. And this is what is suggested in this article: Religion 2 determines the object of religious studies. Since it has, up to this point, remained largely unexplained, there has been little discussion within religious studies on how to conduct research on it. Religion 2 is not described by means of an analytical definition but must be referred to, through the contemporary understanding of "religion," as a "historical" subject matter. "Historical" is understood here as concerning a concrete and unique phenomenon in space and time, and not simply in the general sense of "pertaining to an event in the past." The previously outlined discussion shows that the following three aspects demand comprehensive explanation in any future endeavour to study Religion 2:

1. The historicising of "religion": In the previous discussion, Religion 2 has been roughly described as a contemporary, everyday understanding. How can a reconstruction of this everyday understanding of "religion"

and its historical genesis be appropriately undertaken? This historicising of "religion" is, in my view, the most complex and difficult of the three questions. The previous focus on Religion 1, as the only possibility of defining the subject matter, was based on an academic theory pledging that religious studies has full autonomy over its subject matter. The critical discussion, concerning the concealed legitimising function of Religion 2, has shown, though, that this is a fiction. This then points to the need for a theoretical foundation in which historical subject matters can be assigned to academic disciplines.

2. "Religion" and religious studies: The criticism that many of the past definitions of religion pursue their own religious self-interests—but also more generally the previously described unexplained relationship between Religion 1 and Religion 2—requires a reflection on the connection and the possible interaction between "religion," religious self-interest, and religious studies.
3. "Religion" beyond Eurocentrism: A reason for the lack of interest in Religion 2 from religious studies is because it is seen as a supposedly common "European" perception, which appears to stand diametrically opposed to the traditional, universal, and comparative concerns of religious studies. Thus the question of Eurocentrism requires critical reflection.

Different theoretical approaches are conceivable in order to deal with these three aspects and to work out Religion 2 as the subject matter of religious studies. The proposed conceptualisation that follows is not the only possible theoretical approach in providing a comprehensive reflection of this problem area. Whereas the previous working out of Religion 2 sought to be a consensus-aimed reconstruction of the state of research, the following theoretical explication of Religion 2 is understood as only one of many possible. However, its suitability is proven only if it can satisfactory answer the three above aspects. In my view, this is indispensable for any determination of Religion 2 as the subject matter of religious studies.

The first two aspects are more theoretical, and will be dealt with in the next chapter with reference to the philosophical approaches of Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. The third aspect, as it relates to broader historiographical and postcolonial debates, will be discussed separately in the third part of the article.

2 "Religion" as the Historical Subject Matter of Religious Studies

2.1 *The Historicising of "Religion"*

It might not be self-evident why the historicising of "religion" should be a complex theoretical issue, as histories of ideas and concepts have been established fields of research for a long time. But they are not undisputed. Their inherent theoretical problems become especially relevant with regard to "religion." To make this case, the following argument will be of two parts. Firstly, I will explore the existing conceptual histories of "religion" and discuss their theoretical and historiographical deficiencies. Secondly, I will go on to suggest a "history of names" as an alternative that can overcome these deficiencies. The theoretical foundations and practical implications of this alternative approach will be worked out step by step.

2.1.1 History of the Concept

There are three modern, extensive investigations into the history of "religion" published, and these are written in German and French. In common, they thematise the history of "religion" as a "conceptual history" and, at the same time, come to similar results. Michel Despland, a Canadian theologian and philosopher of religion, in his depiction of the concept of religion from antiquity until the 19th century, comes to the conclusion that a gradual conceptual clarification took place during this time. It reached its highpoint in the "first classics of the philosophy of religion" (Despland 1979: 188)—Kant, Schleiermacher, Schelling and Hegel—and this is where Despland also ends his own portrayal. Equally, the German Protestant theologian, Falk Wagner, sees with the "Enlightenment" and with "Herder, Schleiermacher and Hegel . . . a new foundation of the concept of religion, regarded as constitutive up to the present" (Wagner 1991: 16). This laid open a structure of "religious consciousness" that was eventually taken up in a "theory of the absolute" (Wagner 1991: 555-589).

The depictions of Despland and Wagner are greatly outshone, in terms of their main points and philosophical concern, by the monumental four volume work of the German Catholic theologian Ernst Feil, Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs (1986-2007). Feil arrived at the conclusion that, in the European philosophy and theology of antiquity up to in the 18th century, the word "religion" (lat. *religio*), for the most part, stood for a concept that comprised a certain way of acting. This concept of religion depicted "the scrupulous diligence . . ., to carry out those acts that were owed to a God (as a superior) because of the cardinal virtue of 'justitia' " (Feil 1986-2007: IV.14). Besides this, he identified less specific ways of using "religion"; for example, as a synonym for the four "laws" (lat. *lex*) or "sects" (lat. *secta*) of the Christians,

Jews, Muslims, and Heathen. Similar to Despland and Wagner, he considered the middle of the 18th century to represent "a significant break" (Feil 1986-2007: IV.14). "Religion" now received a completely new understanding, becoming the name of a "modern basic concept" (neuzeitlicher Grundbegriff) that has held sway since the 19th century. Feil identified this with a Protestant theological variant of an understanding of religion of inwardness (Feil 1986-2007: I.25-29), attributed to Schleiermacher (Feil 1986-2007: IV.880). However, Feil brought his description to an end with the 19th century. He presents no sources for the period beyond the early 19th century, so the postulated dominance of his "modern basic concept" of "religion" in modern times remains historically unsubstantiated.

The marking of a modern turning point in the above three histories of the "religion" concept is widely shared in religious studies (e.g., Smith 1963; Harrison 1990; McCutcheon 1997; Feil 2000; Dubuisson 2003; Bergunder 2009; Strouma 2010). However, at the same time, it is clear that no substantial historical proofs have been presented for viewing the religious developments of the 19th and 20th centuries as only a footnote to the decisive courses taken in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In such a perspective, the totally new localisations, since the second-half of the 19th century, provided by natural science, the discovery of the history of religions, and globalization in the context of colonialism, come hardly into view (Masuzawa 2005). This is also the case with the rise of "spirituality" in the 20th century (Carrette and King 2005), etc. "Religion," with reference to the supposed "origin" of the modern concept in the European context of the 18th and early 19th centuries, by definition, is determined by particular European thinking. Accordingly, Feil held firmly: "In other languages and cultures there is no fitting equivalent [for religion]." (Feil 1986-2007: IV.893).

Such an approach leads to a neglect of developments since the 19th century, because it teleologically privileges the "origin." For the historicising of a contemporary everyday understanding of "religion," such an approach is inappropriate. The same applies to the tendency of this conceptual history to refer foremost to philosophical texts and, de facto, to continue the practice of the classical history of ideas to rely on privileged canonical sources (Drews, Gerhard et al. 1985: 273-276; Schöttler 1988: 174). Also, the general ontology of this conceptual history approach requires critical consideration. The continental European history of the concept, towards which the three treatises orientate themselves, claims essentially to differentiate between word, concept and the thing referred to (e.g., Koselleck 1989; Meier 1971). However, no theoretical justification is given for this tripartite ontology. This insufficient philosophical grounding has, rightly, been heavily criticised (Hoelscher 1979; Maset 2002: 161-202; Busse 2003). For "religion," the acceptance of this approach means that the thing that comes to expression in the concept of religion can concretely be named as the actual subject matter of the concept's history. This leads eventually, however, back again to analytical definitions of religion (Religion 1) as the starting point of the conceptual history's investigation. With this backdrop to the above sketched theoretical discussion of religious studies, such a history of the concept can never render a definition of Religion 2 as the historical subject matter of religious studies. It should be pointed out that this conceptual history approach (Begriffsgeschichte) is indeed a typical continental European discipline. However, the Anglophone equivalent, the so-called Cambridge School of Intellectual History (Bavaj 2010) contains, in similar vein, an unsatisfactory theoretical foundation (Bevir 2009; Lane 2012), so it is not possible to meaningfully fall back upon this approach as a possible alternative. Moreover, up to now, this school has written no monograph on the history of religion.

2.1.2 History of the Name

In this area of discussion, the need arises to explain comprehensively the theoretical prerequisites for a meaningful definition of "religion" as the historical subject matter of religious studies. It must be ensured that no encouragement is given to any hidden teleology or privileging of the "origin." At the same time, it needs to be explained how a contemporary understanding is able to act as the starting point of the historicising process. Finally, a comprehensive philosophy of language explanation is required, which can provide an alternative to the assumption of the discussed conceptual history approach of differentiating between word, concept and thing, because it, in the end, opens the door to the re-essentialising of religion. A "naming history" of "religion," as put forward below, can achieve all of this and more.

2.1.2.1 *Difference and the System's Limit*

The starting point is Derrida's critique of the notion that our concepts are based on an actual invariable reference, a reality outside the language sign system in which they are expressed, in other words: the "thing" of conceptual history. Through this, Derrida says, concepts are ascribed a "transcendental signified" and a metaphysics is assumed whose actual character of reference remains unclear and is simply claimed. The idealist-essentialist epistemology that is necessary for this is questionable and the complexity of a discursive production of the concept is neglected and underestimated. Derrida demands, therefore, that the notion of such a transcendental signified, which allegedly guarantees the meaning of the signifier, should be given up. At the same time, however, it follows that "the absence of the transcendental signified extends

the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Derrida 1972: 354). The meaning of linguistic signs comes no more from within themselves, but occurs through the difference to other signs, which continues as an unending game that is open and cannot form any fixed differential relations, since the signs possess no centre due to differential referring.

However, it still remains unclear as to how certainties can be expressed in the face of the differentiation of signs; and, at the same time, there exists the logical problem that only from something specific can there be differentiation, because if all were difference then the difference would end being different (Frank 1983: 550-558). This dilemma is connected to a basic assumption of poststructuralism, which goes back to the Cours de linguistique générale, a work by Ferdinand de Saussure posthumously published in 1916. Its concern was the foundation of structuralism in the philosophy of language. The idea of the differentiality of signs goes back to Saussure, which is also constitutive for Derrida. Saussure postulated that the value of a sign was defined through its difference to other signs. At the same time, however, he held that this differentiality was given limits and structured through a language "system," with "terms all acting in solidarity" (Saussure 1995: 159 [231]). In contrast to Saussure and structuralism, Derrida vehemently rejected the assumption of such a system, because a limit would be imposed from outside the language. Since this language system, according to Saussure, is the guarantor of fixing meaning, there exists, through its loss, the described problem of how certainties can ever be shown in view of the differentiality of signs (Laclau 1996: 52). In answer, Derrida speaks mostly about the "trace" that is present throughout the existing play of difference, because each current sign contains also the characteristics of past relations with other signs (Lagemann 2001: 128-140). Ernest Laclau, in part in working with Chantal Mouffe, has attempted to grasp this problem comprehensively and systematically. Along with Saussure, he accepts the necessity of a system's limit on the fixing of meaning. Like Derrida, however, he rejects any external determination of the discourse, as contained in the assumption of a language system. Laclau holds that a discourse remains always incompletable, but admits that a discourse without limits cannot be described as a discourse, because "the very possibility of signification is the system, and the very possibility of the system is the possibility of its limits" (Laclau 1994: 168).

Laclau concludes that the incompletable discourse strives always, at the same time, for its limits:

> The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations—otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning.... Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112)

Laclau bases his reflections here on the insights of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, calling a discourse without fixity of meaning a "discourse of the psychotic" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112). Following Lacan, he speaks of "nodal points," which are always provisional and partial, but able to effect a specific fixing of the discourse. These "nodal points," however, are not easy to grasp. Due to the inconcludable nature of a discourse, it cannot designate its own limits and, at the same time, there is also no possibility of demarcating limits by means of a discursive exterior, because this is no more available after the rejection of a transcendental signified (Laclau 1994: 168). Laclau represents, therefore, the thesis that these limits can show up only as an "interruption" or "breakdown" of the signifying processes:

> Thus, we are left with the paradoxical situation that what constitutes the condition of possibility of a signifying system—its limits—is also what constitutes its condition of impossibility—a blockage of the continuous expansion of the process of signification. (Laclau 1994: 168)

In order to be able to designate system limits, in this sense, they must be antagonistic or exclusive; for a simple difference cannot place boundaries around a system of differences, because it cannot be unhinged from the unending play of difference.

A certain challenge is depicted here to consider the drawing up of boundaries as "interruption," "breakdown," or "subversion" of the unending play of difference. Laclau does this by means of counterposing the logic of difference, which asserts signification, with "the logic of the subversion of differences," which he characterises as a "logic of equivalence" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 128-129; Laclau 1994: 170-171). The "collapse" of the difference brings forward a "logic of equivalence," which marks out a system limit of the discourse. This logic of equivalence does not lead to a positive identity between signifiers, because the signifiers that are made equivalent are and remain different from each other, and their differentiality cannot be abolished through the logic of equivalence. Their differentiality does not allow that an immanent limit of the system, which has been determined by the signification itself, comes into being in a discourse. As said before, also an external system limit can hardly be postulated, because this requires a "transcendental" signified.

The denial of a transcendental signified, however, is the central thesis of this philosophy of language. The return to a transcendental signified would be a return to an essentialist fixing of meaning. The equivalence in this approach, therefore, can only be depicted as "subverting the differential character" of the signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 128). If, however, the equivalence setting of all differences cannot take place on the basis of a general positive signified of all participating signifiers—rather only through the "interruption" of the difference—then, the question arises in a particular way as to how the necessary system limit, which represents the prerequisite for every fixity of meaning, can at all take place.

Laclau attempts, as mentioned, to solve the problem by postulating a system limit that is exclusive and antagonistic. It is this excluding limit that holds together a discourse and makes possible the fixity of meaning. "It is only that exclusion that grounds the system as such" (Laclau 1994: 169), because the excluding limit ensures the produced equivalence. The crucial point is that this exclusivity is a negative operation and so no positive signified, of all participating signifiers, is assumed. In reference to equivalence, Laclau speaks only of a "principle of positivity" or, in allusion to Hegel, of a "pure being" (Laclau 1994: 169-170). Similarly, "what is beyond the frontier of exclusion," he explains, becomes merely a "pure negativity," because "in order to be signifiers of the excluded... the various excluded categories have to cancel their differences through the formation of a chain of equivalences of that which the system demonises in order to signify itself" (Laclau 1994: 170). For the fixing of a discourse, positive and negative equivalential chains collapse and form constant oppositions so that the "production of meanings" takes place through "opposition generating inclusion and exclusion mechanisms" (Nehring 2006: 820).

2.1.2.2 *Empty Signifier as the Key to a General Ontology of Being*

How, though, are these equivalential chains concretely held together? According to Laclau, this happens through signifiers that have been emptied of differentiality and, therefore, are described as "empty signifiers." This "emptying" can happen with any signifier and, for this reason, there is no privileging of particular signifiers as especially predestined for emptying. The formation of empty signifiers is through and through a contingent occurrence. At the same time, empty signifiers are "always constitutively inadequate" for their task and so their durability is threatened, because the "emptying" of the signifier never succeeds fully in holding together the chain of equivalence, and its particular difference remains as a potential, threatening the stability of the equivalential chain. In this way, every occasional fixing of a discourse through

empty signifiers is "the result... of the unstable compromise between equivalence and difference" (Laclau 1994: 171), and remains thereby also contested and contentious.

The point of this approach is that it dismisses every essentialist foundation of a discourse's limits without in principle, however, claiming illimitability, arbitrariness or blurring of attributes of meaning. In every discourse, fixings of meaning are necessarily undertaken all the time, which show clear limits that exclude other meanings. These fixings of meaning or closing of the discourse are necessary and in no way arbitrary! Yet, they are at the same time contingent or, to say more precisely, their existence and demarcation are not justified through an external reference or transcendental signified. This missing external reference however, in view of the differentiality of the sign, makes it in principle impossible to fix definitive meanings. Therefore, Laclau speaks of a necessary but ultimately impossible closure of the discourse through empty signifiers.

Laclau developed this formal model in order to overcome the economic essentialism of Marxism and carry it over into a post-foundationalist political theory (Marchart 2010). Not for nothing is this approach held within political studies "as one of the most influential contributions to political theory of the present" (Nonhoff 2007: 7). In his writings, Laclau thematised his theory exclusively in regard to its implications for political studies, appearing not to interest himself more closely in its general ontological status. Hence, its use in the area of religious studies needs to be justified. Oliver Marchart, however, has correctly stressed that Laclau's signification theory depicts, in a "strict philosophical" sense, a "theory of the constitution of being in its entirety" (Marchart 2010: 214-216; Marchart 2007). Its particular attractiveness for reception in religious studies is that it wants to be both a "political ontology" and "ontology of power," where every fixity of meaning is understood as part of a conflictive social process of negotiation (Nehring 2006). In connection with this, it needs to be clearly pointed out, as a consequence of this approach, that discourses are understood as social practices having material effects and are not to be misunderstood as something purely intellectual or pertaining to ideas. The usual, but unsatisfactory, dichotomising into discursive and non-discursive, into thought and reality, or into foundation and superstructure etc. is overcome in this concept of discourse. Indeed, language cannot function as a representative of something outside its self, but it does not naturally follow that a world outside language is denied (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 108; Sarasin 2003: 100-121). Empty signifiers mark a social praxis. The fixing of a system of differences through an empty signifier is not a pure phenomenon of language;

rather, it penetrates "the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 109).

2.1.2.3 *The Name Instead of the Concept*

The "empty signifier" can be directly taken up in service of a consistent and non-essentialist historicising of "religion." Of particular interest is that a form of fixing of meaning can be attributed to the "empty signifier" and this offers a comprehensive alternative, in terms of philosophy of language, to the classical triad of word, concept and thing, as in the conceptual history approach mentioned. So, Laclau stated that "the empty signifier... cannot be a concept, for the relation it establishes with the instances it regroups is not one of conceptual subsumption" (Laclau 2006: 108). Instead, the empty signifier is "a name" (Laclau 2006: 109). This name does not stand for a concept, because the equivalential chain, which the empty signifier holds together, is heterogeneous and is only defined through the negative antagonistic limit, not through common descriptive features as determining circumstances. Following a corresponding interpretation of Slavoj Žižek, Laclau took over the anti-descriptivism of Saul Kripke, where names do not refer to things that share their described qualities (descriptivism). Instead, according to Kripke, the names of things are ordered through a "primal baptism" (Žižek 2008: 95-144; Laclau 2005: 101-110). Anti-descriptivism, then, emancipates the signifiers from their bond to a signified, because naming and describing are separated out. Žižek's thesis is that the defining of the name's contents depicts the result of the name-giving; it is "the retroactive effect of naming itself" (Laclau 2005: 103). Thus, the naming is a pure, present articulation that refers to nothing behind or in front of itself. It is a newly created act, which does not express the proper usage of a linguistic term. For that reason it is often denoted by the rhetorical figure of a catachresis (lat. *abusio*), however, thereby denying that a "proper" usage of a linguistic term is at all possible (Posselt 2005).

If the naming is not a linguistic wording of a conceptual content, which it intersubjectively legitimates, then its intersubjective plausibility can only be secured by means of people identifying with the name. Laclau speaks about the naming creating a "people" and, thus, it is understood as a social act. This is connected to the name as an empty signifier, which carries out a hegemonic closure of the discourse by means of establishing an equivalential relation. Each of the particular signifiers that are in an equivalential relation stands for so-called "unsatisfied demands," which are aggregated in the name as an empty signifier. The driving force by which these unsatisfied demands strive towards

a common closure is heavily psychologised by Laclau. This is not unproblematic, but there is not the space here to discuss it further (Stavrakakis 2007).

For Laclau, naming is connected with a "radical investment," which lends it an affective character. This affect is based on an unfulfilled longing for the universalising of individual, unfulfilled demands (Laclau 2005: 101-117). What he eventually wants to make clear here is that naming is to be equated with identity formation. There is no expression of social identities in the name; rather, they are created in the name. Through naming, individuals receive their social identity, become social subjects, and as a "people" are bound to a common identity. The acting subjects are, then, the retroactive effect of naming and not their prior cause. Thus, naming is constitutive for all social negotiation processes. For this reason, it is for Laclau, to be equated with the political. Naming is associated with the exercise of power. The antagonism, which limits the equivalential chain, necessarily excludes another, categorically, and is thus a mechanism of power (Marchart 2010: 216): "The constitution of a social identity is an act of power and... identity as such is power" (Laclau 1990: 31). The effects of power, in this understanding, do not exteriorly define the discourse, but they are something that must be revealed within the concrete discursive articulation.

The formation of equivalential chains through naming is, for Laclau, a complex process of struggle for political hegemony. Strictly speaking, it concerns two empty signifiers, "one at each side of the antagonistic frontier" (Laclau 2006: 108). It follows, in theory, that it always concerns two "names"—one for the positive and the other for the negative equivalential chain—although the second name only describes the negative antagonism, whose demarcating makes possible the positive equivalential chain. Furthermore, the same name can become the empty signifier of different equivalential chains, and so, in that sense, it may float freely (Laclau 2005: 139-156).

Even though, at first, this depicts a purely formal and abstract model, it can be of direct benefit for the use of the name "religion." Talal Asad, in his much discussed study about secularism, has brought to our attention that "the secular" and "the religious" indeed do "overlap," but that the one is not simply the "opposite" of the other, both must be considered separately in their own right (Asad 2003: 25). Unfortunately, he has not theoretically deepened this important thought. In Laclau's model this would be immediately plausible. If "the religious," as an empty signifier, named the positive equivalential chain, and "the secular," the negative antagonistic limit of the exclusion, then it could be reversed in a competing hegemonic closure. Then, "the secular" would form the positive equivalential chain and "the religious" would be the purely negative antagonistic limit. "The religious," for its part, is only the negation of "the

secular" and has, in this function, no positive meaning. The same signifiers, then, have each a very different position in the fixing of meaning. "The religious" and "the secular" would be free floating signifiers and not simply related to each other as a contrasting pair as, for example, Fitzgerald claims (Fitzgerald 2007).

2.1.2.4 *History of the Name Instead of a History of the Concept*

Laclau's concern is to show how political hegemony is produced, how the political is necessarily registered in the social, and how every naming is a fundamental political act, a discontinuous, newly-created and, at the same time, contingent process, which carries out an actually impossible closure and, with this, produces the social grouping and its identity. The political is here extricated from the narrowness of politics and is registered for society as a possible course of action, without falling back into essentialist reasoning.

This political intention does not lie behind the deliberations on the historicisation of "religion" described here. However, a promising option is to replace the conceptual history with a history of the "name." This is possible through a change of perspective, in which the naming obtains a history. Up till now, with Laclau, we can explain the name "religion" only in its discontinuous and purely present formation, but not in terms of its continuity and history. Laclau has slight interest in the historical dimension of his theory. It only appears where he discusses the social in opposition to the political, and also when he takes and reinterprets the concept pair of sedimentation/reactivation from Edmund Husserl:

> The way I am presenting the argument is that we live in a world of sedimented social practices. The moment of reactivation consists not in going to an original founding moment, as in Husserl, but to an original contingent decision through which the social was instituted. This moment of the institution of the social through contingent decisions is what I call "the political" (Laclau in Worsham & Olson 1999: 18).

While Laclau is principally interested in how the social can again become political, the historical view addresses more the process through which the political becomes settled in social affairs (sedimented) and obtains a socio-institutional existence. Laclau gives only a few indications as to how he imagines this sedimentation process. He highlights the moment of objectivization and the simultaneous concealment of the fact that this is about "fossilized practices of power" (Marchart 2010: 204):

> Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a "forgetting of the origins" tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence. This is the moment of sedimentation. It is important to realize that this fading entails a concealment (Laclau 1990: 34).

It, however, has not yet been said how the sedimentation of the name, that is its objectivization and historical formation, is to be more precisely imagined. Here, Judith Butler's concept of "performativity" can offer some insight. Butler shares with Laclau, to a great extent, the same poststructuralist basic assumptions, which she has productively made use of in the area of gender studies (Marchart 1998; Butler, Laclau et al. 2000; Distelhorst 2007). The naming as "primal baptism" is a hegemonial but, at the same time, contingent act, which is necessary to create meaning. This meaning exists, at first, only as a pure presence in the articulation, and the only possibility of continuity, and with it powerful historicity, is through a repetition of the same naming and its equivalential chain. This act of repetition, which is strictly speaking always a new creation (it can never be identical with itself), is that which, according to Butler, is sedimented. This "sedimented iterability" effects "performativity." Butler borrows the concept of performativity from the linguistic theory of Austin and understands language generally as an act (Rolf 2009: 213-221), which is also for Laclau a central concern. She receives Austin, however, through Derrida, who linked the success of a speech act or performative utterance in that "its formulation ... repeat a 'coded' or iterable statement" and is "identifiable in a way as 'citation' " (Derrida 1982: 326; Butler 1997: 51; Butler 2011: 172). Derrida's thesis of iterability and citationality of linguistic signs led Butler to say that "words engage in actions or constitute themselves a kind of action ... because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a sedimented iterability" (Butler 1995: 134; Krämer 2001: 251 A. 34). The performative force of the names can be deduced from their citationality:

> If a performative provisionally succeeds ... then it is ... only because the action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices (Butler 2011: 172).

With this a historicising of names and thus a naming history are conceivable:

> In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages... Historicity is a term which directly implies the constitutive character of history in discursive practice, that is, a condition in which a "practice" could not exist apart from the sedimentation of conventions by which it is produced and becomes legible (Butler 2011: 172, 214 n. 7).

The citationality is concealed in the discourse and, through this, at the same time, an objectivisation is achieved. In respect of this, performativity in Butler connects seamlessly to Laclau. Butler, though, goes a step further, recognising a process in the concealment and objectivisation through which, in discourse, apparently unalterable material references are created—signifiers—which claim for themselves to refer to a real external. In this respect, performativity in Butler explains how the notion of a transcendental signified comes about, the critique of which is, as we saw above, the starting point of Derrida's linguistic philosophy. Butler argues:

> Certain reiterative chains of discursive production are barely legible as reiterations, for the effects they have materialized are those without which no bearing in discourse can be taken. The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility (Butler 2011: 139).

While the naming, as primal baptism, is a purely present hegemonic act, the power dealings that come to expression therein reveal their social effect through repetition, which sediments the names. The hegemonic closure, which is bound with the primary baptism, is "secured" through the sedimented name and materialises as a social "reality." By this means, performative, powerful names come into being that structure the social and act as reified, identificatory, general terms. These general terms structure the social in such a way that their contested character becomes obscure, and both their underlying hegemonic closure and their excluding character are disguised.

Both Butler and Laclau strongly stress that sedimentation does not alter the fact that the causative repetition depicts, in each case, a new creation or catachresis. The repetition cannot possibly, therefore, be identical with itself and, as re-signification, makes space for "transformation" (Butler 1997: 150) or generally for the political (Laclau). The social, according to Laclau, can never entirely erase the political, which also applies the other way around.

A comprehensive non-essentialist model is thus provided, which can be used to research the contemporary, everyday understanding of "religion" and its history. "Religion," indeed, is always only comprehensible in a concrete articulation, which cannot be identical with any antecedent, but at the same time it is a sedimented name. Through the notion of sedimentation, a consistent historicising of "religion" is possible and necessary. As a sedimented name, we encounter "religion" as a real, existing, materialised phenomenon that profoundly structures the social (Meyer 2012). This materialisation makes it intelligible as to why Religion 2, also in unexplained form, can display such a powerful and convincing effect as the implicit subject matter of religious studies.

2.1.2.5 *Naming History as Genealogy*

For the designation of religion as the historical subject matter of religious studies, it is vital to provide the sedimented name "religion" with a history. In principle, this can only mean a retracing of the particular repetitions that have produced the sedimentation. This is precisely the concern of genealogy, as developed by Michel Foucault, following from Nietzsche. It is not surprising, then, that Laclau and Butler refer explicitly to this genealogical approach when they bring forward historical arguments (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 7-8; Butler 1999: 9). For a naming history of "religion," therefore, genealogy comes into consideration.

The orientation towards genealogy with Foucault stands in connection with his definitive break with structuralism's thought forms, which are still recognisable in L'archéologie du savoir (1969). In reaction to the May 1968 protests in Paris, Foucault broke completely with structuralism and became a theoretician of power (Brieler 1998: 237-270). A central component of this new orientation was genealogy as a new understanding of history, which he expressed (Foucault 1977) with reference to Nietzsche's Zur Genealogie der Moral (1887). Foucault sharply and polemically criticised the alleged contemporary praxis of historiography: this "pursuit of the origin" as "the site of truth," that means "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities, because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession" (Foucault 1977: 142-143). The genealogist wishes rather to dispel "the chimeras of the origin" and detach it from its underlying metaphysics (Foucault 1977: 144). The genealogist "listens to history" and finds that things have "no essence":

> What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity (Foucault 1977: 142).

Foucault censures the search for the origin because it promises a unity and continuity of history that historical events themselves, in their disparity, cannot fulfil.

Historiography should also refrain from searching for an aim or telos, nor presume a development according to historical laws. Genealogy concentrates itself on "the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality" (Foucault 1977: 139). It starts from the contingency of all historical events: "The forces operating in history . . . respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events" (Foucault 1977: 154-155). Haphazard does not mean, though, arbitrary, because the "haphazard conflicts" are not "a struggle amongst equals," but rather a struggle of "domination" (Foucault 1977: 150).

Along with the rejection of an origin and the repudiation of any teleology or laws in history, Foucault reproaches, thirdly, the ruling historical scholarship, that it denies its constitutive perspectivity:

> Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy—the unavoidable obstacles of their passion (Foucault 1977: 156).

In contrast, Foucault demands that a genealogy always takes, as its starting point, the here and now of the historian as the genealogy of one's own knowledge. A direct leap into the past is not possible, rather it concerns "a genealogy of history as the vertical projection of its position" (Foucault 1977: 157).

The consequences of a genealogical approach for the historicising of "religion" are considerable. The entry point can only be the contemporary everyday understanding of "religion," and in no way any supposed "origin" or "forerunner" in the past. The genealogical definition reverses, then, the process of the chronological timeline and goes from the present into the past! Yet, also in the present, the name "religion" is available to us only in a concrete articulation, which only comprises a diachronic perspective in so far as it is, at the same time, a "citation." This citation can be traced back to its derivation which then, however, must be examined as a concrete articulation in its own right. Its

repeatability gains the linguistic sign, according to Derrida, through its capacity to be decontextualized, that is to say, through its release from any defined context (Krämer 2001: 250). The reason for the continuity of meaning through sedimentation lies in this capacity for decontextualization. Therefore, any citation traced back to its derivation has to be recontextualized in the context of this derivation, whereby discontinuity automatically comes to light. Hence, the question regarding the emphasis on continuity and discontinuity through the genealogy remains inevitably controversial, and refers back to the unavoidable present perspectivity of the genealogical operation. This means that the historiographical statement of a sedimentation is itself also a hegemonic closure, in as far as the stated continuity is a retroactive result of the naming. Nevertheless, the establishment of continuity is in no way arbitrary or purely subjective, because its plausibility must be able to directly relate to the historical sources.

It should be emphasized that genealogy is a theory and not a method. Foucault has repeatedly stressed that genealogy does not in any way mean a break with the established methods of historical scholarship; on the contrary, it "demands relentless erudition" (Foucault 1977: 140; Brieler 1998: 600).

Nonetheless, for concrete historical work it is a challenge to translate the theoretical issues of genealogy into methodologically feasible research questions. Two problem areas appear to me to be of particular importance. On the one hand, it is practically impossible to trace all repetitions historically, which automatically demands an enlarged screening for the establishment of historical dependencies. A concrete, methodological implementation of the genealogical approach could be reached, for example, by describing the main, continuous, observed repetitions of the name "religion"—i.e., "religion" as a sedimented name—as a discursive network, which I have proposed in other places (Bergunder 2010a; Bergunder 2010b). In such a methodological usage of the genealogical approach, by means of a network model, it must remain clear, however, that no ordering categories with a reference external to the discourse are permitted an introduction.

A second, more important methodological compromise, which the implementation of the genealogical approach demands, consists of bending to "scriptural inversion." This formulation was coined by Michel de Certeau, who characterised the following problem:

> The first constraint of [historiographical] discourse consists in prescribing for beginnings what is in reality a point of arrival, and even what would be a vanishing point in research. While the latter begins in the

> currency of a certain social place and a certain conceptual or institutional apparatus, the exposition follows a chronological order. It takes the oldest point as its beginning. (De Certeau 1988: 86)

So long as it remains clear that genealogy, through its enquiry into historical events from the present, proceeds back into the past, then it can, in concrete academic research, yield to historiographical conventions in order to remain readable and widely acceptable (Haustein 2011: 248-260). It will then, at least at first, to a great extent, be written in "mirror writing" (De Certeau 1988: 87), so that its depiction follows the chronological course and scriptural inversion.

From the reflections presented here, there ensue considerable consequences for the manner of conceptualising the academic subject matter of religious studies. As already mentioned, the question of the balance between continuity and discontinuity remains inevitably controversial, but the historical establishment of sedimentation is not by chance, because it is bound to the interpretation of historical sources. According to the current state of research, it scarcely makes sense to ascribe to today's name "religion" a sedimentation before the middle of the 19th century. In that time, the nomenclature of "religion" took place, which produced new equivalential chains in the face of the challenges of natural science and the discovery of religious history, as well as globalisation in the context of colonialism, and which the present sedimented name of "religion" still describes (Bayly 2004; Beyer 2006). However, this is an assertion that is purely based on the interpretation of the respective historical sources by current scholarship; it is subject to change as future research might, and most likely will, suggest different assessments regarding continuity and discontinuity. This is in no way meant to establish the 19th century as a historical watershed that essentially defined religion once and for all.

If, in this way, the historical subject matter of religious studies is established, which the contemporary standing of the discussion only traces back to the 19th century, then the question naturally arises, in what sense can older historical phenomena be the topic of religious studies? Religious history before the 19th century, of course, remains the subject matter of religious studies, since the present day "religions" must be researched in terms of the total history in which they present themselves today. Only then can the genealogical praxis reveal its critical potential. However, the conceptual starting point of any history of religion, be it the 20th or 2nd century, is always the present-day understanding of "religion" and the contemporary context of research. Within the proposed approach here, there is no direct journey into the past. With allowance for this, though, a study of the Upanishads or the Pali Canon, etc., remains an indispensable part of religious studies.

The actual problem cases concern phenomena that no longer exist today, yet traditionally belong to the scope of religious studies. These are primarily the so-called "religions of antiquity." Here, though, it can also be argued that the "religions of antiquity are not only relevant as the historical background for the understanding of early Christianity, but indeed also for the understanding of European religious history" (Berner 2000: 31). The ancient world remains, then, for this reason alone, the subject matter of religious studies, because in the overall course of the history of Christianity it was repeatedly interpreted anew, as it was in the course of the history of Islam, esotericism, etc. In this way, the ancient world is historically bound to present-day "religions."

It can appear, here, as if a great part of the discipline's traditional historical subject matter can only be included in religious studies by means of a workaround. However, this is not in any sense the case, because the study of history, from the viewpoint of genealogical praxis, is the necessary condition for the possibility of the disclosure of contingency and with it for critique. Religious studies, therefore, is dependent on an operating history of religion of "relentless erudition" (Foucault). There can, on the other hand, be no return to definitions of religion, which originally justified the discipline's traditional subject matter. Ever since these came in for criticism, an intense discussion has taken place about the pre-modern research areas of religious studies. Concepts like "religions of antiquity," "ancient religions" etc. have been radically questioned, for some time, within the discipline (Rüpke 2001: 9-45; Nongbri 2008). The genealogical approach offers, then, a solution for an existing controversy and does not create a new one.

2.2 *"Religion" and Religious Studies*

The approach discussed here, concerning the historicising of "religion," assumes that religious studies was and is an important authority of articulation for the sedimentation of "religion." That religious studies is itself part of the history of religions is nowadays a widely accepted notion within the discipline. The problem becomes acute, though, as to how the difference between "religion," religious self-interest, and religious studies is to be appropriately conceived (Martin/Wiebe 2012).

The reference to religious studies as an institutionalised academic discipline and its application of generally recognised academic methods is not enough. Even then, religious biases could inform research questions and research objectives. As the result of the controversies over the phenomenology of religion, many academics in the discipline want to be sure that religious studies does not deliberately pursue particular "religious" biases and, of course, vice versa, not an "anti-religious" agenda. The escape into attempts at

nominalist definitions, outlined at the beginning, can also be viewed in connection with this. It is, in a certain way, an attempt to avoid any normative academic rationale. This does not represent a viable option, not only because of its explanatory weaknesses; this nominalism also can't avoid certain normative assumptions concerning reality (ontology), even if these are not disclosed or are denied.

In this situation, it is important to clarify the normativity of the genealogical praxis with regard to its ontology and its general research interest. The former occurs in the framework of the discussion about the empty signifiers, as the key point of a general ontology of being, because the genealogy is grounded in the same poststructuralist basic assumptions. At this point, it is essential to formulate the focal interests of genealogy. These are not meant, here, to be the general research interests of religious studies overall, but they only concern the establishment of the historical subject matter of "religion" through genealogy.

The general research interest advocated here is historical and was grasped by the late Foucault as a "permanent critique of our historical era" (Foucault 2007b: 109). That means that it entails "a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing, through a historical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 2007b: 113). Historical ontology is "critical ontology" (Foucault 2007b: 118), that is why its general interest exists in the "critique" itself: "Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth" (Foucault 2007a: 47). In his notion of critique, Foucault sees himself in the tradition of Kant and his understanding of the Enlightenment (Hemminger 2004). "What Kant was describing as the Aufklärung [Enlightenment] is very much what I was trying... to describe as critique" (Foucault 2007a: 48). The critique, for Foucault, is an Enlightenment "ethos," which questions the power structures of present society. Genealogy criticises the fossilised and concealed power practices, which have become sedimented in the social. It reveals its historical development and, with it, its contingency (Foucault 2007b: 114). Contingency does not mean either "chance" or "arbitrariness"; rather the insight that what is, is not of necessity so. With this, the power and might of sedimented names are not contested, which as materialised references claim a necessary existence. The unveiling genealogy shows only that the sedimented names cannot honour this claim of necessity, because other historical courses would have been theoretically possible, and the supposed historical continuity and unity of the defined contents of names are foremost a retroactive result of the present naming.

The extent to which Foucault wants to tie his concept of critique to Kant is also clear in the way in which the genealogical programme is formulated in allusion to Kant's three critical questions: "What can I know?" 2. "What ought

I to do?" 3. "What may I hope?" (Kant 1979: 818 [A805]). Foucault places these three questions in a genealogical version:

> How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (Foucault 2007b: 117)

It concerns working out knowledge and power, which "in the context of interactions and multiple strategies induce ... singularities, fixed according to their condition of acceptability" (Foucault 2007a: 66). As with Laclau and Butler, the demonstration of these contingencies leads, at the same time, to "a field of possibles, of openings, indecisions, reversals and possible dislocations" (Foucault 2007a: 66). Critique, in Foucault's understanding, has nothing to do with the advocacy of postmodern arbitrariness, nor does it stand for relativism, because it does not have its own position out of which a relativity of truths could be meaningfully claimed. The insight into contingency opens up space merely for transformations. It could be said, with Judith Butler, that in the critique "one looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also for the limits of those conditions, the moment where they point up their contingency and their transformability" (Butler 2002: 222).

For the historicising of "religion," a general research interest, informed by the Enlightenment, is marked out here, which clearly differentiates religious studies from "religion." The genealogical designation of "religion" as the subject matter of religious studies is not a simple historical description in which historical development is assumed to exist and, thus, potentially affirmed. The identified critique here, concerning the interests of religious studies in defining its subject matter, has nothing to do, on the other hand, with the conventional "anti-religion" critique. The latter criticises religion as irrationality, superstition, etc., in favour of rationality, science, etc. Foucault's critique is directed in equal measure towards all forms of metaphysical certainty, including the certainty of the anti-religion critique (Mas 2012).

3 "Religion" beyond Eurocentrism

As already elaborated, there is a discussion in contemporary religious studies as to what extent the concept of "religion" is applicable to non-western contexts. Religion 2 is considered here mostly as "a western folk concept" (Greil 2009), also as a "European invention" (Haußig & Scherer 2003), or simply as a

"European concept of religion." In place of "European," the words "western," "Christian" or also "western Christian," etc., can be found, which certainly does not contribute to any clarity in the argument.

From a genealogical perspective this talk of a "western concept of religion" makes little sense, because all over the world today, outside Europe and in all non-European languages, an established use of "religion" is to be found (Peterson & Walhof 2002). The talk of a "European" or "western" concept of religion, then, is not due to its present day usage, but because of the historical claim that "religion" has its "origin" in the West. The "chimeras of the origin" are ruling undisturbed. Part of the idea of a European origin of "religion" is a European claim of ownership. The coupling of origin and ownership, within theory construction in religious studies, leads to a simply baffling Eurocentrism when the authentic use of "religion" is considered as a peculiarly "European" or "western" matter. Non-Europeans, then, use a concept that has its origins somewhere else and so it cannot be of their "own." Their use of "religion" estranges them from their "own" tradition and is then necessarily "not-ownable," so, it is inauthentic.

This controversy is to a high degree ideologically charged and invites ideological responses. The genealogical approach, though, can in effect duck this dispute, when it asks which connection exists between today's global use of "religion" and European history. The connection can be formulated as a purely historical question. In order to properly answer this, religious studies can profit from the results of other academic disciplines, especially in the fields of global history, orientalism and postcolonialism. Out of this arises a historical constellation that can be briefly sketched. In order not to over complicate the portrayal, scriptural inversion is permitted.

3.1 *"Religion" and Global History*

The British historian, Christopher A. Bayly (2004), some time ago, presented a comprehensive outline of a global history. Connected to this is a particular view of the long 19th century as decisive for setting the course of modernity and a phase of the first globalisation. Bayly (2004: 1-2) detects the "rise of global uniformities" in the 19th century, related to a complex process of an "ambivalent relationship between the global and the local." He gives plenty of space to the question of religion and names the homogenization and standardization of "world religions" as one of the central phenomena of the 19th century. Further global history sketches have since been published that also thematise "religion" in a detailed way (Beyer 2006; Osterhammel 2009). It is noteworthy, also within the global history approach there is an observable trend that considers "religion" as a "western" invention of the 18th- early 19th century, which has been globalized in a second stage since the 19th century (Osterhammel 2009: 1242).

3.2 *The Orientalism Debate*

This global history thesis encountered the central insight of the so-called orientalism debate, which claims that 19th-century colonialism forced western knowledge upon colonised cultures and societies. The theoretical framework, within which this is discussed, was formulated by the Palestinian-American literary scholar Edward Said (Said 1994). Said presented the thesis that the "Orient" is a monological product of western knowledge, constructed as a discourse of alteration of one's own culture and religion. The "Orient" was always the "other," and it was this distinction which served to guarantee one's own identity. In the course of 19th-century colonialism, this western construction of the Orient was imposed upon the colonised, and they were forced to define their identity within this framework. In Said's approach, the cultural consequences of colonialism, in their full radicalness, could be engaged. The encounter of the colonised with the colonial rulers was no "dialogue" between equals, but rather a negotiation process within a discourse of power, in which the positions of the speakers were unequal to the extreme. Said orientated himself towards reflections from Foucault. The "speaking subjects" are, for Foucault, subject to the rules and exclusion mechanisms of the ruling discourses. A "discursive 'policy' " (Foucault 1972: 224) stands, to an extent, in service of colonial power relationships and takes care that the colonised only receive subsidiary articulation possibilities. When "religion" is understood as a part of western knowledge about the "Orient," then, in the progression of colonial power discourse, it is also correspondingly forced upon the colonialized. At its core, this approach resembles the global history viewpoint and both justify, to a certain extent, the talk of "religion" as a European invention.

3.3 *Postcolonialism*

The orientalism debate prompted a wider discussion about how the role of the colonised, within a colonial power discourse, is to be more precisely understood, since Edward Said did not enter further into this area. In regard to this, the matter is mostly debated under the name of postcolonial studies or postcolonialism (Young 2001; Castro Varela & Dhawan 2005).

Postcolonialism also assumes that the colonised subjects are subjugated to orientalism as part of western knowledge and, thus, do not possess any autonomous prior subject-positions. Yet, as already explained, every fixing of meaning is available only as a concrete articulation, and its durability or sedimentation can only be guaranteed through the repetition of this articulation. Sedimented

western knowledge, within a colonial power discourse, is also dependent on repetition in order to claim its continuity. Yet, as we have seen, no repetition is identical with itself and, as a re-signification, it opens up space for transformation (Butler) or, in general, for the political (Laclau). It is precisely here that postcolonialism comes in. It is interested in the specific forms of reception of western knowledge and understands these not merely as their identical adoption. Colonial discourses, therefore, are anything but monolithic or invariable; rather they are of a polyphonic and unstable nature. They possess a considerable dynamic, a substantial potential for transformation, and they can, in their fragility, at the same time, articulate opposition (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1994). It is exactly this that postcolonialism wants to historically capture and, therefore, is interested in the complete breadth of articulation of the colonised.

If all articulations in a discourse refer to each other, in so far as they are "citations," then, they are dependent on one another. From this, the claim can be derived that global history must be comprehended as "entangled histories," since "the related entities are themselves in part a product of their entanglement" (Conrad & Randeria 2002: 17). The emphasis, here, is that the West, through its "entanglement" with the colonies, did not experience an autonomous history, rather its identity formation was "entangled" with the colonised. The sedimentation of western knowledge is also dependent on the repetition of the colonised. Even if western knowledge held a hegemonic position, it was at the same time a product of "entanglement."

3.4 *Global "Religion"*

This historical constellation can be described from a genealogical perspective as follows. With the awareness of global history, the critique of orientalism, and postcolonialism, it can be assumed that the present global use of "religion," with some plausibility, can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Herein, there is continuity and discontinuity, as well as a general mutual entanglement. In the age of colonialism, under the sign of European-American supremacy, "western knowledge" was an unambiguous reference in local identity formation processes, because it was thematised, at the same time, as a "universal knowledge" (Chakrabarty 2000). With this interface, the thesis of a "European" or "western" understanding of religion can be historically captured, without having to start from a prior, privileged European "origin." From those who assert a "European concept of religion," it should be requested that they refrain from leading the discussion abstractly, but rather provide concrete sources of evidence in the above sketched historical constellation. The thesis of a "European concept of religion," then, is transferred into a concrete historical research project of religious studies and the varying evaluations are referred back to the different interpretations of historical sources.

4 Conclusion

Religious studies, up to now, could not agree on a common subject matter. In past discussion, however, it has remained largely unnoticed that there exists a potential point of agreement between the different positions. It was argued that nearly all approaches, at least implicitly, refer to a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion as a legitimizing reference, which, at the same time, remains largely unexplained and unreflected upon. This was called "Religion 2," in contrast to "Religion 1" which stands for explicit definitions of religion in the field of religious studies and related academic disciplines. Religion 2 was suggested to be a suitable candidate for a consensus-capable subject matter or object of religious studies. However, it is no small matter to conceptualize Religion 2 appropriately. A comprehensive theoretical approach is needed to address the three central issues involved. Firstly, it has to be shown how Religion 2 can be historicised and how a historical subject matter can be assigned to academic disciplines. Secondly, Religion 2 is being framed not only inside but also outside academia, not least by the members of "religions" themselves. If Religion 2 is also shaped by religious perspectives, the question must be answered whether its establishment as the subject matter of religious studies carries a religious bias into religious studies, which would affect the established self-understanding of religious studies as an academic discipline. Thirdly, as Religion 2 is often considered to be a "Western" concept, the question arises whether Religion 2, as the subject matter of religious studies, implies a Eurocentric perspective.

The second part of this article suggested a theoretical approach that explicitly responds to the first two points. With regard to the first point, it was shown how the inherent short-comings of historicising Religion 2 via conceptual history could be overcome with the help of philosophical insights from Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler. The history of Religion 2 is understood as a naming history in the form of genealogy. The genealogical emphasis makes it possible to link this approach to Michel Foucault's understanding of "critique" as an ethos that can inform the general research interest of an academic discipline, which then relates to the second point. The third part of the article tackled the third point concerning the question of Eurocentrism. The orientalism debate and postcolonial studies provide a perspective to understand Religion 2 in a

global context and as part of a global discourse, thus overcoming the notion of it being simply a Western concept.

The major practical point of the approach suggested here is that the only way of ascertaining Religion 2 is through empirical research. Religion 2 is not understood as an abstract theoretical concept but as a historical phenomenon. The historical subject matter of religious studies, so conceptualised, demands empirical research, wherein Religion 2 is traced from its historical articulations. In this way, the theoretical approach translates into empirical research questions that wait to be investigated. The establishment of Religion 2 is not another attempt to define religion where "nonspecialists start to doze" and "scholars of religion, who've heard it all before, exhale a knowing sigh. Not another (doomed) attempt to characterize religion!" (Tweed 2006: 29-30). Differences about the precise characterization of the subject matter of "religion" become concrete questions on the appropriate interpretation of historical sources. To increase our understanding of Religion 2, more research in the global religious history of the 19th and 20th centuries is urgently required. This is a hitherto neglected field of religious studies, yet, according to current research, it is to this time period that the sedimentation of "religion" can be meaningfully traced back. This endeavour can profit from trends in the study of modern Buddhism and Hinduism that increasingly apply a global perspective, often explicitly examining the ways in which "religion" has been appropriated since the 19th century (e.g., Pennington 2005; McMahan 2009; Josephson 2012; Bergunder 2014).

As in all historical interpretation, the particular historical reconstructions of Religion 2 will always remain contested. However, I argue that this does not prevent it from being generally accepted as the subject matter of religious studies.

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