RELIGIO VERSUS RELIGION

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It is well known that the Regensburg speech of Pope Benedict XVI on violence and religion in September 2006 had the power to stir up the reactions of Muslim ulama in every part of the world. Less known is the fact that his diplomatic policy toward Western Europe has caused uproar in secularized circles of post-Calvinist Switzerland. After the visit to the Vatican of French president Nicolas Sarkozy in December 2007 (followed in September 2008 by a visit of the Roman pontiff in Paris ended by an outdoor mass before 250,000 people), three professors of the University of Lausanne penned an article admonishing about the dangers of a convergence between the resacralisation of contemporary society and nationalist resurgence in Europe.¹

Apart from their peculiar intention of contrasting politics (surging) to religion (declining) as a cohesive factor in society,² the final statement about the status of religion in general calls for some qualification. Calame, Kilani and Mancini pose as an axiom the idea that religion is a relativistic concept, ‘né dans la mouvance chrétienne, et plus généralement monothéiste’. The idea that religion is a social construction can be false or true (and it is probably true), but it implies an assertive denial of any transcendence, which is per se a renouncement to scholarly neutrality, in other words, to the stance of ‘methodological agnosticism’ in favour of a ‘methodological atheism’, a position involving, in my view, a kind of reversed fideism.³ But it is the second part of the assertion (the category

² It is difficult for an unprejudiced observer of the world situation to share a judgement like this: ‘La religion est en passe de s’effacer pour céder la place à une mise en forme de l’être-ensemble où le sujet humain devient la mesure et l’arbitre des choses’. This is an example of wishful thinking. An indirect reply can be found in the most recent The Response of Religion in Social Life. Essays in Honour of James A. Beckford (ed. E. Barker; Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008), a volume dedicated to a leading sociologist of religion, where it is shown how religion affects and it is affected by the dynamics of contemporary society.
³ The social constructionist form of ‘bracketing’ that Peter Berger labelled ‘methodological atheism’ has long been a presupposition taken for granted in the sociological study of religion. But, consistently applied, methodological atheism ultimately dissolves
of religion being born only after the rise of Christianity and being modelled after it) that, to my mind, is philologically-historically untenable and represents a definitely 'false idea about religion'.

Admittedly, many (and extremely authoritative) scholars of religion argue in the very opposite direction and in agreement with the above mentioned statement. The list includes an expert in ancient Mediterranean religions (and religious historiography), an expert in Iranian religion (and religious historiography), and leading specialists of ancient Greek and Roman religions, such as Philippe Borgeaud, Jan N. Brem-

the very category of experience, and camouflages a confessional attitude (from my point of view, self-confident atheism is a quasi religion). More truly neutral than methodological atheism, and actually more in line with what Berger seeks to protect, is a form of bracketing that might be labelled methodological agnosticism (a method that tends to be employed by the psychology of religion and, in the field of the history of religions, has been adopted by Ninian Smart and Peter Antes). For this concern, I share the views of D.V. Porpora, "Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience', Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 36 (2006): 57–75, and W.J. Hanegraaff’s mordant pronouncement, in "Leaving the Garden (in Search of Religion): Jeffrey J. Kripal's Vision of a Gnostic Study of Religion", Religion 38 (2008): 259–276 (271): 'We do not know that spiritual entities or metaphysical realities are illusions; all we really know is that we have no scholarly tools or methods to either verify or falsify their claimed existence, let alone to study or investigate them. All we can do is study what people claim about them, and why'.

4 J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious", in idem, Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179–196 (180): 'In both Roman and early Christian Latin usage, the noun forms religio/religiones and, most especially, the adjective religiosus and the adverbial religiose were cultic terms referring primarily to the careful performance of ritual obligations'.

5 M. Stausberg, "Approaches to the Study of "Time" in the History of Religions", Temenos 39–40 (2003–2004): 247–268 (258, n. 13): 'We have to keep in mind that the category "religion" as an autonomous sphere of life and society is a historical product of European (religious) history. The application of "religion" to other cultures or older periods of European history implies a Eurocentric perspective. Even if—in spite of good reasons for doing so—we temporarily fail to avoid the term "religions", we should at least try to avoid the idea, or rather illusion, of an autonomous "religious object"'.