CHAPTER 2

Comparison, Practice, and Meaning: Martin Riesebrodt’s Theory of Religion

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One of the more interesting theories of religion from recent years distinguishes itself by its refreshing criticism of popular current theoretical attitudes towards the study of religion and by its exploration of interesting alternatives. This is Martin Riesebrodt’s theory of religion as a system of practices based on the promise of salvation through the interaction with superhuman beings. Riesebrodt, who sadly passed away in December 2014, was Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School and Department of Sociology, and held until his death the Yves Oltramare Chair of Religion and Politics in the Contemporary World at the Graduate Institute Geneva.1 Following is a brief analysis and evaluation of what are in my view the most valuable contributions of Riesebrodt’s theory to the field of religious studies.2

Before The Promise of Salvation: Max Weber, Fundamentalism and Comparison

Riesebrodt published his long awaited theory of religion in 2007 in Cultus und Heilversprechen, which appeared in English in 2010 as The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion (Riesebrodt 2007, 2010). Before discussing his theory of religion, it is worthwhile to take a brief look at Riesebrodt’s scholarly work preceding the book that reveals his path to a general theory of religion. Riesebrodt’s theoretical persuasion is rooted in the sociology of Max Weber.

1 Martin Riesebrodt was my much appreciated doctoral advisor at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

2 More detailed and general analysis of Riesebrodt’s theory are the following: Michael Stausberg published a thorough and critical reading of Riesebrodt’s theory in 2009 (Stausberg 2009). Mary Konieczny, Loren Lybacher and Kelly Chong, all former advisees of Riesebrodt, published in 2012 in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion a detailed analysis of Riesebrodt’s theory, followed by several articles in the same issue that attempted to apply Riesebrodt’s theory to the respective authors’ fields of expertise (Konieczny, Lybarger, and Chong 2012).
Weber’s sage and evenhanded attitude toward his subject of study, his use of social and theoretical categories, as well as his emphasis on a firm empirical and historical grounding for his analyses also pervade Riesebrodt’s work. In fact, Riesebrodt’s theory of religion is to such an extent a continuation of that of Weber, whose work was unfinished at the time of his death, that Philip Gorski (2011, 1385) characterized Riesebrodt’s *Promise of Salvation* (2010) as “a coda to Weber’s *Sociology of Religion*, as an attempt to provide the sort of definition that Weber himself did not.”

In the years between his training as a sociologist in Tübingen, Berlin, and Heidelberg and his work on his theory of religion in the United States, Riesebrodt served as the associate director of the Max Weber archives in Munich and was one of the editors of the *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*. He wrote a number of articles, essays, and introductions on several aspects of Weber’s work (below is a select bibliography of his work).³ Riesebrodt felt defensive about the correct reading of Weber’s work and in his writing and teaching warned that Weber’s analysis of capitalism and modern democracy as having originated in the West had, against what Weber’s himself had intended, “contributed to an interpretation of the Western path of development as the ‘normal’ one and other historical developments as ‘deviations’” (Riesebrodt 1993, 8). Riesebrodt did the exact opposite. He used Weber’s analytical apparatus precisely to avoid a normative model of Western historical development.

In 1990, the year of his appointment at the University of Chicago, Riesebrodt published *Fundamentalismus als patriarchalische Protestbewegung*, which appeared in translation in 1993 under the title *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Riesebrodt 1990 and 1993; see also his subsequent publications on religious fundamentalism: Riesebrodt and Chong 1999; Riesebrodt 2000a, 2005b). On its appearance, the book was hailed as one of the best analytical works on religious fundamentalism, and despite the dramatic developments in religious fundamentalism worldwide since, his colleague Bruce Lincoln could still state this with confidence upon Riesebrodt’s passing (“In Memoriam” 2015; see also Stausberg 2009, 264).

As I see it, the strength of *Pious Passion* particularly lies in the way Riesebrodt used comparison. Riesebrodt developed a broadly applicable concept and explanation of fundamentalism by using a theoretically well-framed comparison between Protestant American fundamentalism from 1910 to 1928 and

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³ Riesebrodt’s most important writings on Weber are “Charisma in Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion” (Riesebrodt 1999) and his essays “Religiöse Vergemeinschaftungen,” “Charisma,” and “Ethische und exemplarische Prophetie” (in Kippenberg and Riesebrodt 2001). Another very insightful essay is “Dimensions of the Protestant Ethic” (Riesebrodt 2005a).