FROM HISTORICISM TO FUNCTIONALISM: THE RISE OF SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES TO RELIGIONS AROUND 1900 AND THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Religion continues to be a subject of reflection within all advanced civilizations and especially in modern society. From a scientific-historical point of view, however, those discussions have to be distinguished from regular academic discourse. The science of religion arose within the formation of the modern scientific canon in the second half of the 19th century. Scientific religious research had been institutionalized by different disciplines, professorships, and institutes. It formed its own theories and schools and began to organize its discourses by special congresses as well as by its own publications. In this sense the history of the science of religion has already been subject to several examinations. Attempts though to reconstruct the rise of scientific approaches to religions with regard to social and cultural development are more recent. What were the reasons for the increased interest in scientific religious research? And, what was its cultural relevance? In the following, I will give a brief outline of some relations between the rise of scientific approaches to religions and their socio-cultural context by means of selected paradigms.

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1. The Experience of Development and Change

There have certainly been social and cultural shifts during all times and within all levels of civilization. The 19th century, however, represents an age of rapid change and simultaneously of intensified reflection to an extent that had been unknown so far. The reason for this is to be found in the technical-industrial progress and the enormous expansion of knowledge. Increasing development and change led to the discernment that culture is contingent and therefore caused a need for re-orientation.

The dynamic progression of social development had consequences on the mode of science as well as on its subjects. On the one hand, science turned to empiricism and began to reflect on its own temporality with the transition into the 19th century. On the other hand, the scientific subjects themselves began to be examined from a historical point of view. This interest in history resulted in historicism. History, however, had not only been relevant as a mere reservoir of facts. People wondered about the historical determinedness of their own situation. That is why history had to be able to explain the development as well as the origins of contemporary society and culture. These circumstances represent the basis for various evolutionary theories to emerge. They persistently determined the history of culture in general and the beginning of scientific religious research in particular.

Thus, the 19th century is not only marked by history that has been rediscovered and newly acquired after the Age of Enlightenment. It also represents the century of theories of origination. Scholars of various provenance strove for the knowledge of the historical genesis of different cultural phenomena. Within the cultural and social research the most favored subjects to this kind of perspective were: language(s), religion(s), the family, and, the legal and economical institutions. But that was not yet sufficient! History of culture should lead to

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