Bernd-Christian Otto, Jörg Rüpke, and Susanne Rau (eds.)


I probably should never have agreed to review this book, as I am currently a research fellow at the same center and university as the editors, two of whom I consider as personal friends. As I procrastinated in sending the book back to the review editor (another colleague and friend), however, it seemed ever more unlikely that somebody else would step in. I do feel that this title should be brought to the attention of the readers of this journal because it deals with a topic of fundamental importance for our discipline, a.k.a. the history of religions.

The editors point to advances in theoretical discussions on historiography in the past decades and conclude that, on the one hand, “religion has rarely been treated as an independent, potentially interesting, exceptional, or problematic case in the theoretical literature on historiography” (p. 2), while historians of religion, on the other hand, “tended to overlook or disregard critical or deconstructivist approaches in the study of historiography and have thus missed the opportunity to strengthen their own historical methodology” (p. 3). While these statements situate the agenda of the book on the methodological and theoretical levels of historiography, the rather general title of the volume seems to cast the net much wider; the subsequent discussion, however, focuses on something like a middle ground when it addresses “religious historiography — i.e., historical narratives created by religious groups” (p. 4).

The editors — two historians of religion and a historian — claim that “religious historiography is certainly a unique genre of historiography” (p. 6) and identify four distinctive features of religious versus “secular” historiography, namely, (1) that it attributes agency to non-human agents; (2) that it operates with modes of argumentation like fate, providence, or the denial of historicity; (3) that it operates with a range of media other than narrative, such as hymns and prayers or objects and buildings; and (4) that it tends to originate in situations of inner- and interreligious conflicts, diversity, and pluralization (pp. 4–6). I have to confess that I am not entirely convinced by this comparison. It can seem to be a bit off balance: does it compare religious historiography with professional or with secular historiography? Some if not all of these feature are also applicable to its secular other. Consider “productive forces,” “markets,” “evolution,” and other non-human but non-religious agents; the prominence of nationalist myths in national historiography; the fact that formulae and things also tell non-religious history; and that secular historiography can be said to have arisen in situations of conflict, plurality, and diversity. An important theoretical point, however, emerges insofar as the editors’ focus on the fact that religions create
historiography contradicts the claim sometimes made that religious rhetoric essentially serves to dehistoricize and naturalize reality. The editors are right in emphasizing the impact of emic (religious) on etic (scholarly) historiography and the methodological dangers of uncritically adopting emic models.

The volume is a result of a three-year research project and builds on papers sparked by different conferences and workshops. It comprises twenty-three chapters, including three by the editors (Rüpke on ancient Rome; Otto on a nineteenth-century French historian of magic; Rau on four early modern Christian writers or practitioners of history). The volume is divided into three sections. The headings of these parts read well (“Origins and Developments”; “Writing Histories”; “Transforming Narratives”), serving as road signs for readers; they also probably helped the editors to organize the contributions. Yet, with the possible exception of the third part, the nature of the essays does not create the impression that they were specifically written for any of these sections; in fact, as is typical for this kind of edited volume, they all seem to provide independent ruminations on the main topic of the volume, and many offer relevant insights and reflections. As is always the case with edited volumes, some chapters have a greater appeal to a reader than others, and some appear to be more constructively linked to the agenda of the volume than others; for example, while one chapter discusses early Muslim historiography explicitly on the basis of postmodern critique, another chapter does not even hint at problems surrounding the widely discussed notion of tradition.

Some chapters discuss one author and/or one work (Anders Klostergaard Petersen on Paul; Ingvild Sælid Gillhus on Epiphanius of Salamis; Shahzad Bashir on Ghiyāṣ al Dīn Khwāndamīr; Martin Mulsow on Tobias Pfanner; Renée Koch Piettre on Charles de Brosses; Bernd-Christian Otto on Éliphas Lévi; Reinhard Kratz on Julius Wellhausen), while others focus on a group of works or a genre (Sylvie Hureau on biographies of Chinese monks; Chase Robinson on early Islamic biographies of Muḥammad). Others concentrate on religious groups (Johannes Bronkhorst on Brahmanism) or regional traditions (Per K. Sørensen on Tibetan historiography; Jon Keune on a regional Western Indian bhakti group; Cristiana Facchini on aspects of Jewish historiography). The remaining chapters discuss particular academic disciplines (Giovanni Filoramo on Italian “History of Christianity”; Yves Krumacher on French Protestant church history; Franziska Metzger on German and Swiss church history), surveys on the historiography in a given religion/tradition (Benedikt Krahnemann on tradition in Catholic liturgy), historiographical constructions of a form of practice (Gabriella Gustafsson on Roman warfare), and given topics in a certain period (Pekka Tolonen on Medieval sources on the origin of the Waldensians; Hannah Schneider on the trope of the victorious church in