

Where are the Boundaries of Religion?
Considerations on the Emergence of a Global Religious
Field and on Processes of Sacralization

Paper given at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, March 11, 2013

0. Starting point

The Study of Religion and interdisciplinary research on religion have been facing a host of challenges for some time now, among them the following three issues:

- First, research on religion, whether from a historical or present-day perspective, has lost sight of its subject due to epistemological considerations as well as postcolonial studies.
- Second, deconstructivist insights have made it clear that it is not possible to speak of religious traditions such as “Christianity”, “Islam” or “Buddhism” as single, clearly-defined or even monolithic entities. The difficulty of distinguishing different traditions from each other without essentializing them is one that research on religion shares with cultural studies in general.
- Third, there has been reflection on the concept of religion for a long time. However the question of

“the” history of religions – of its unity within the different processes taking place individually at different times –, i.e. the question of what constitutes the religious practice in time and space and what holds it together in its innermost core, this question is condemned to the margins.

The subject of religious studies risks being blurred or even disappearing with the mentioned problems – for example as the dissolution of religion in “culture”, as some colleagues suggest.¹ Furthermore, with an exaggerated deconstructivism it is not possible to fully understand how and why religious traditions – though construed – in practice are nonetheless often perceived as distinct entities.

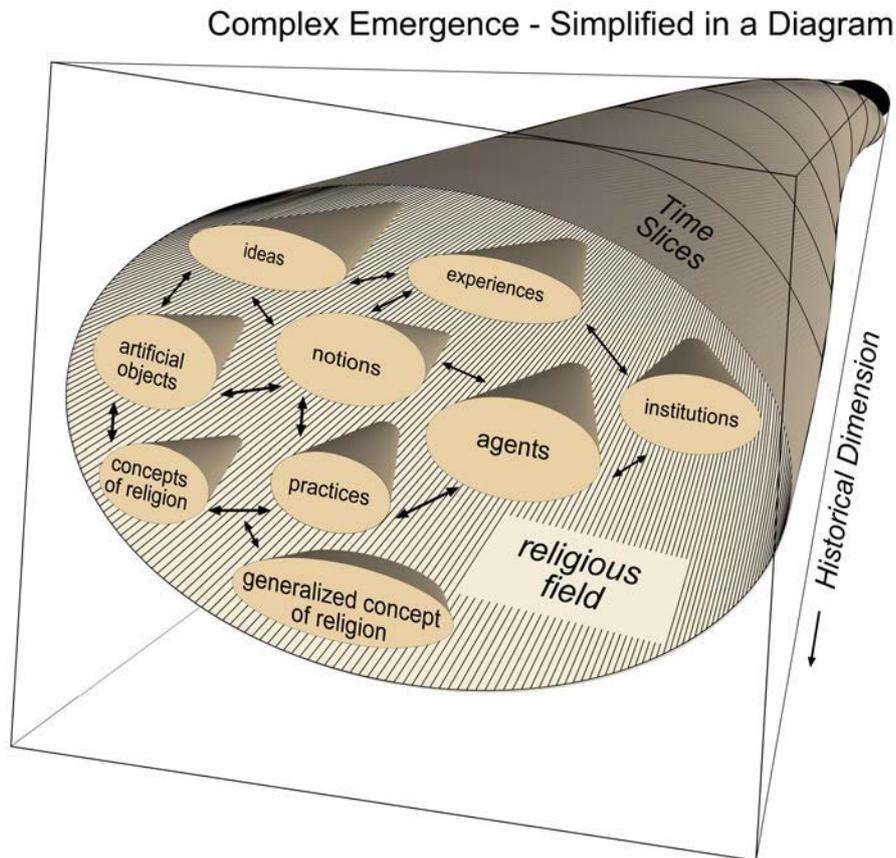
Facing the mentioned challenges, I will start with considerations on analytical concepts, namely on the notions of field and tradition, followed by observations on the emergence of regional religious fields and generic object-linguistic concepts, and finally turn to questions of an emerging global religious field. Since I am an outsider in the philological and historical subjects I refer to in my paper, please excuse any mistakes, wrong spelling and pronunciation. I will be happy to learn from the respective experts.

¹ Cf. McCutcheon 2007, Kippenberg/von Stuckrad 2003, Fitzgerald 2000.

1. Some considerations on analytical concepts

a. The field concept

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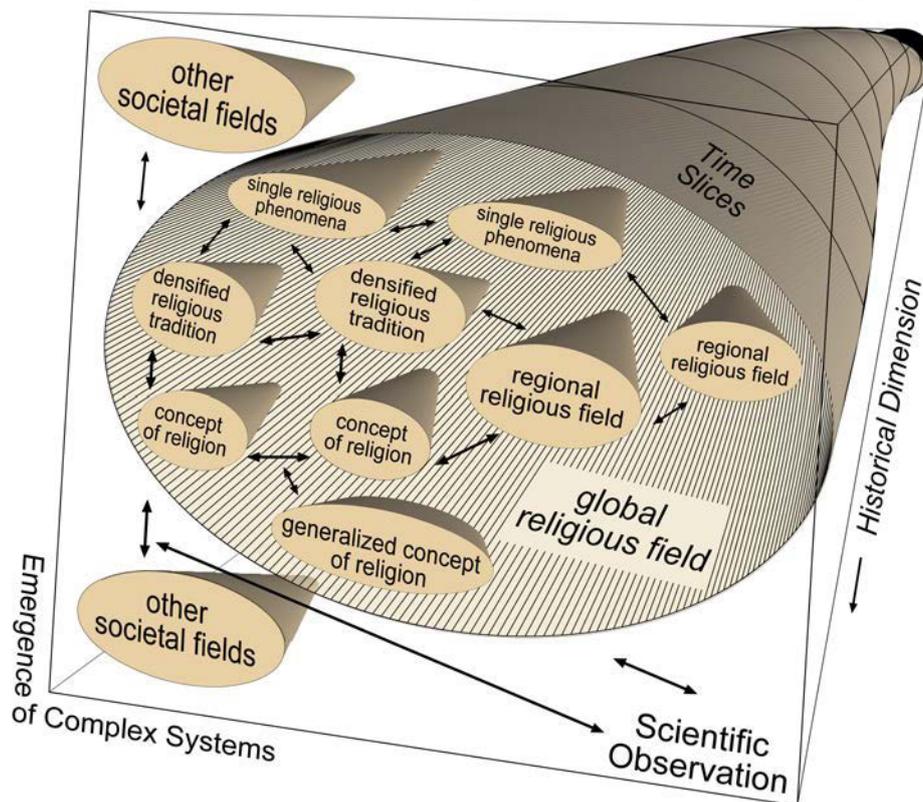


In order to avoid any essentialism, I suggest to refer to the field concept of Pierre Bourdieu and to further develop it. Following on from Bourdieu, I do not have a substantial understanding of “a religious field”. It is not a once and for all times given entity. Rather, it is permanently being constituted, reproduced, and changed by interactions between different elements, such as ideas, agents, notions, institutional settings, experiences, artificial objects, and concepts. Within the field approach the meaning, function and impact of a single element

cannot be understood in isolation, but only in a broader context of mutual relations and attachments. A field of forces is both more and less than the aggregation of single elements and holds them together. It is not to be understood essentially in the sense of a common ground, but as energy between elements that refer to each other, be it consensual or – as it is mostly the case – contested.

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Complex Emergence - Simplified in a Diagram



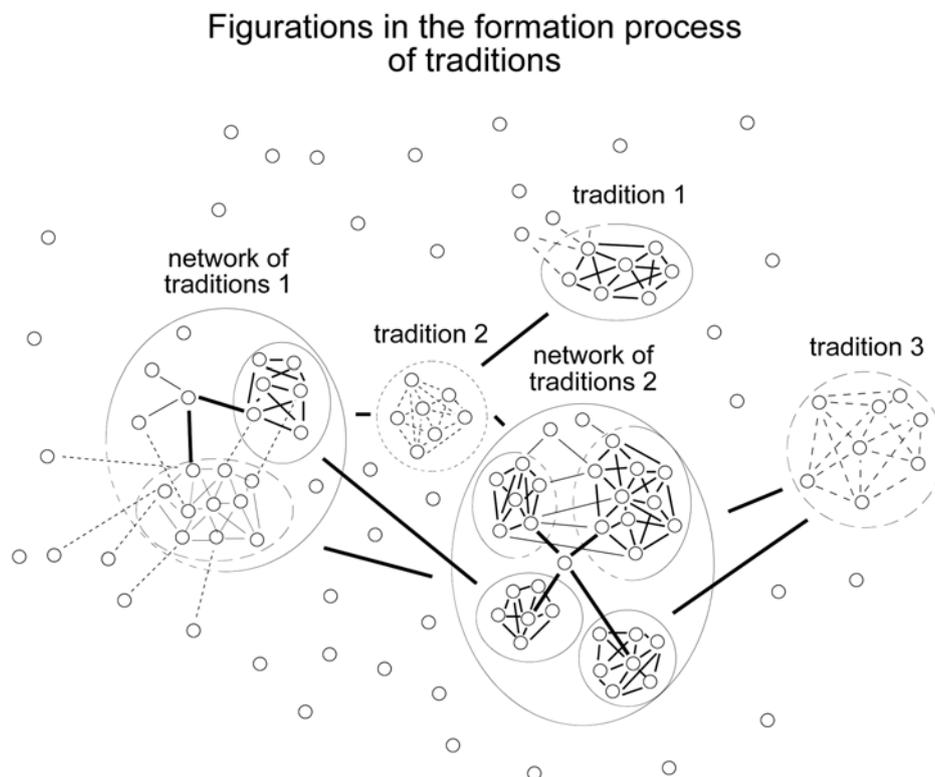
Furthermore, it is relevant to distinguish between the inner and the outer boundaries of a religious field. Its inner boundaries are permanently being established and reproduced by the intra- and inter-religious controversy surrounding its conceptual and practical content. Its outer

boundaries emerge through the distinction and interferences between religion and other societal fields. And not to forget the interaction between religious practice and its scientific observation which constitutes a field of its own; this is an old and complex hermeneutical issue.

b. The formation of traditions

Another conceptual tool is the notion of tradition.

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Against the background of field theory and following on from the approach on tradition of Edward Shils I regard a religious tradition as a field that is permanently being

established, reproduced, and changed by its elements, i.e., agents, concepts, institutional settings, artificial objects and so on. These elements form a semiotic chain by more or less strong interaction, i.e., by referring to each other in a high frequency.

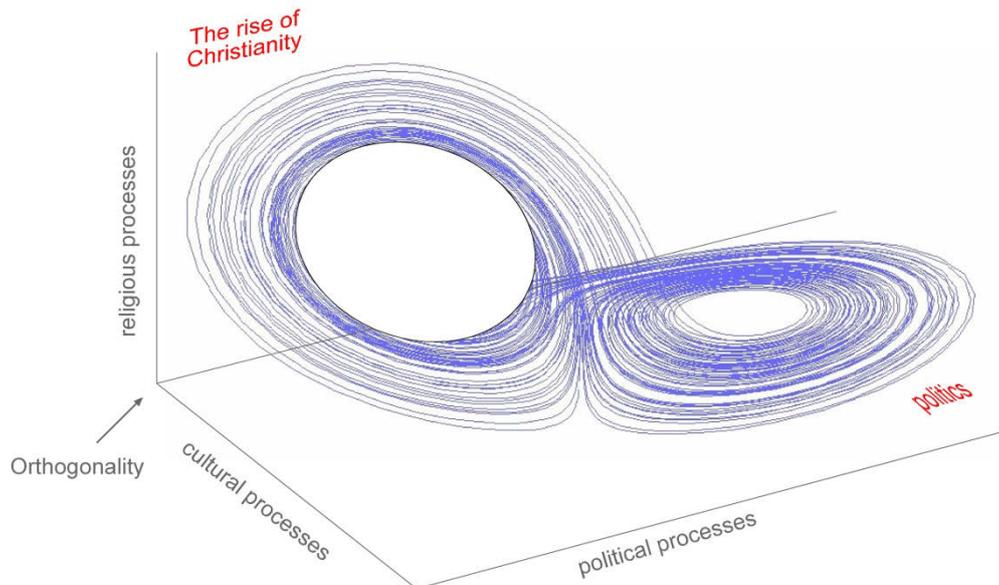
A religious tradition is the result of formation and reform processes, and – at least from the perspective of a scientific analysis – a retrospective construction: Tradition means attributing continuity and is designed to trace back one's own position to sources that are claimed to be “authentic”. In general, the reason for the formation of a tradition is the size of a religious movement or the encounter with other religious currents, due to which internal and external differences require regulating. Thus, the existence of a tradition is always claimed by certain agents who are opposed by others.

Traditions and families or networks of traditions can be identified and distinguished from each other without regarding them as essential entities or having to follow object-linguistic normative differentiations, for instance between orthodox, heterodox and heretic.² Instead both strong and weak interactions and boundaries can be identified. Thus, it is possible to distinguish less condensed networks of traditions, whose elements are

² An observer might see “the orthodox as the member of a family of traditions, which the orthodox deny even more vehemently than the heterodox” (Shils, *Tradition*, p. 267).

only loosely connected, from more condensed networks of traditions, as this figure intends to illustrate.

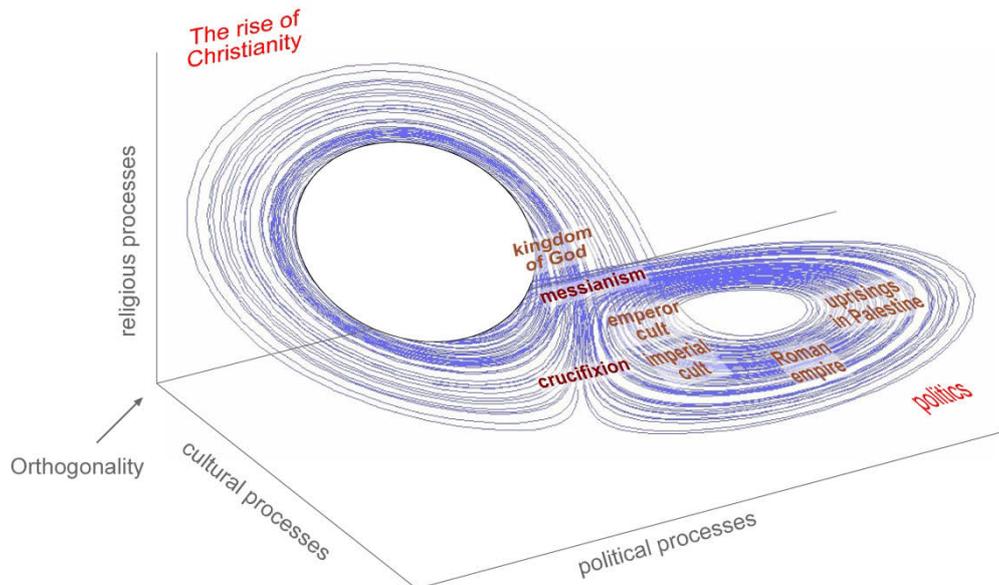
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I would now like to refer to the rise of early Christianity with regard to its connection with Judaism as part of the emergence of a Mediterranean religious field and its interferences with politics as an example for the constitution of a religious tradition as a field of interacting elements with inner and outer boundaries. In late antiquity Islam also comes into play. For reasons of modelling, I distinguish between political, cultural and religious processes as three dimensions. And please accept my apologies for oversimplifying a complex historical process. However, although I am an outsider in

this respect, I think that there is some empirical evidence for these distinctions.

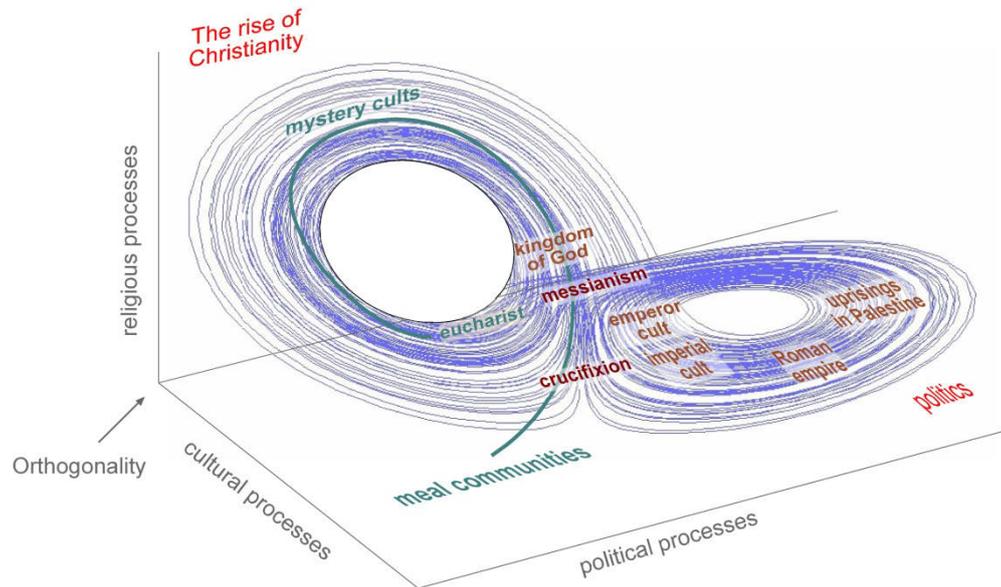
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I would like to mention the Roman Empire, uprisings in Palestine, imperial and emperor cult as well as the Roman practice of crucifixion as elements of politics. The latter three elements enter the other field of forces called early Christianity and are transformed to religious entities. The kingdom of God is understood as distinguished from politics, and crucifixion becomes a religious sign of salvation. But how did this happen?

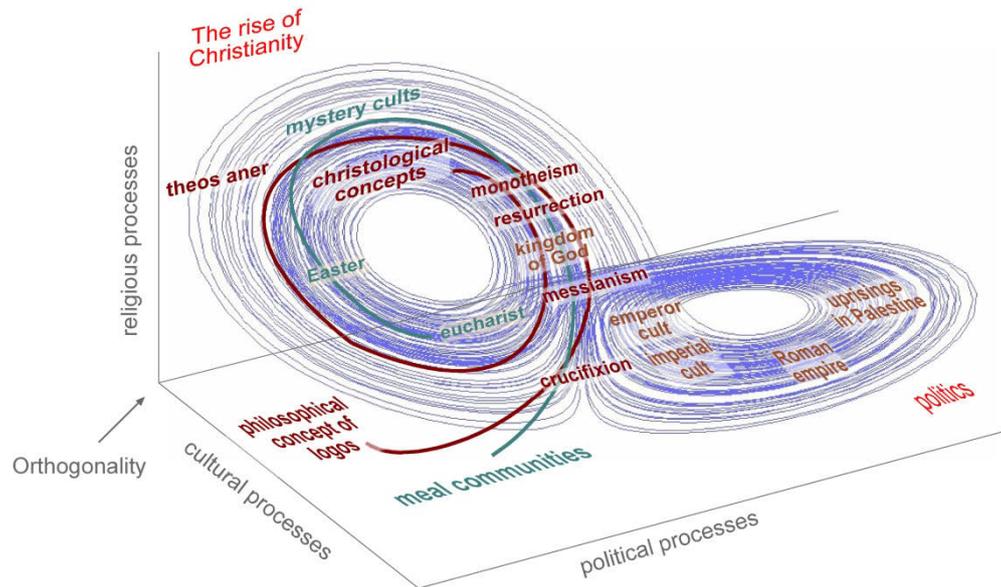
The process can be understood if we consider the attachment of the mentioned elements to other entities which at the same time constitute the field called early Christianity.

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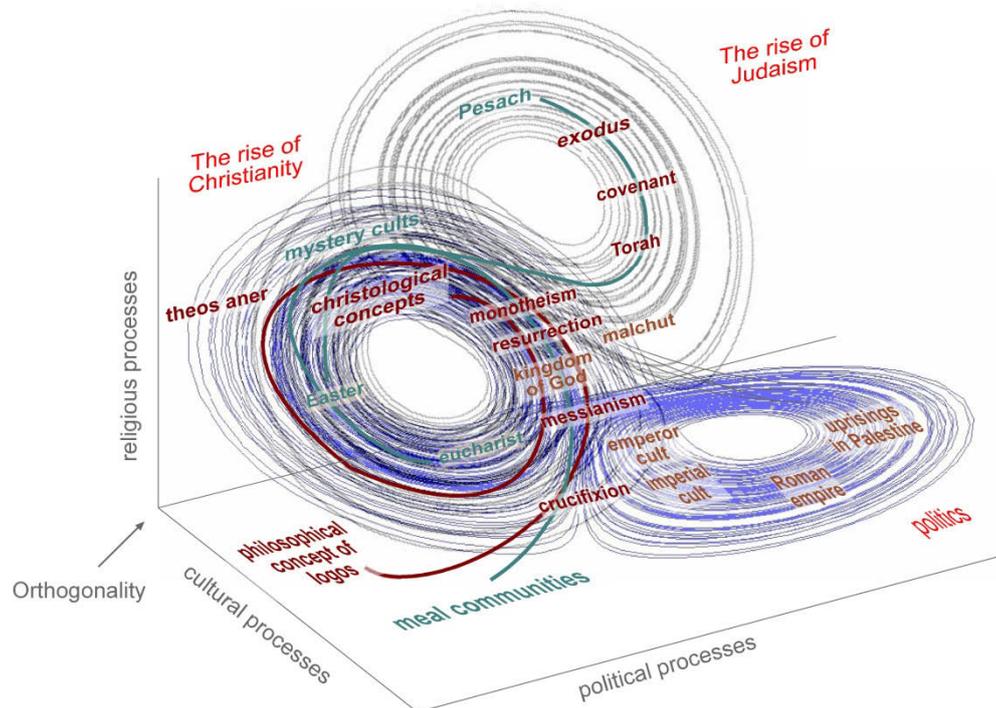
E.g., common meal communities turn via mystery cults into the Christian concept of eucharist which is being attached to the concept of crucifixion.

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And this process is again accompanied by a transformation of other actants, for instance, from the philosophical concept of logos, via the motive of the *theos aner* and concepts such as resurrection and messianism to christological concepts.

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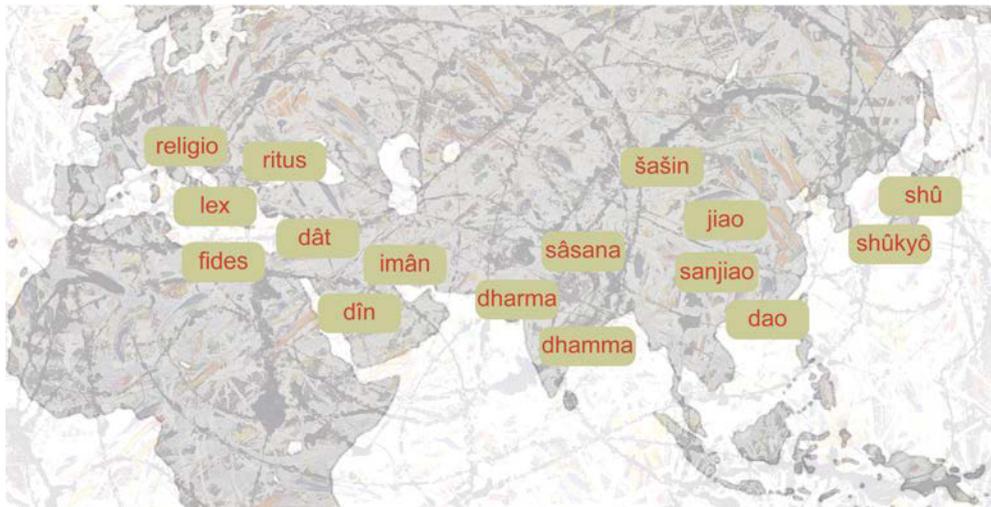
In addition, we have to consider the formation of early Judaism as part of the emerging religious field when describing the rise of early Christianity. Judaism also constitutes through the interaction between different elements – such as melchat as the Jewish version of the kingdom of God, Pessach, the concepts of exodus and covenant, the Torah, and so on, but they also interact with politics and with elements in the Christian field. These mechanisms are the take off for the development of a Mediterranean religious field to which Islam later enters, and there are similar processes going on in South and East Asia during antiquity.

This example does not claim full empirical evidence, since I am a layman in the ancient Mediterranean history

of religions, and the example is much too rough. The entities mentioned are to be added by many others and consist themselves of many other elements. Thus, the entities should be analyzed as punctualisations, hubs and nodes in the sense of approaches on social and semantic networks. This example should only demonstrate the heuristic potential of the field model for empirical work.

2. The formation of regional religious concepts and fields

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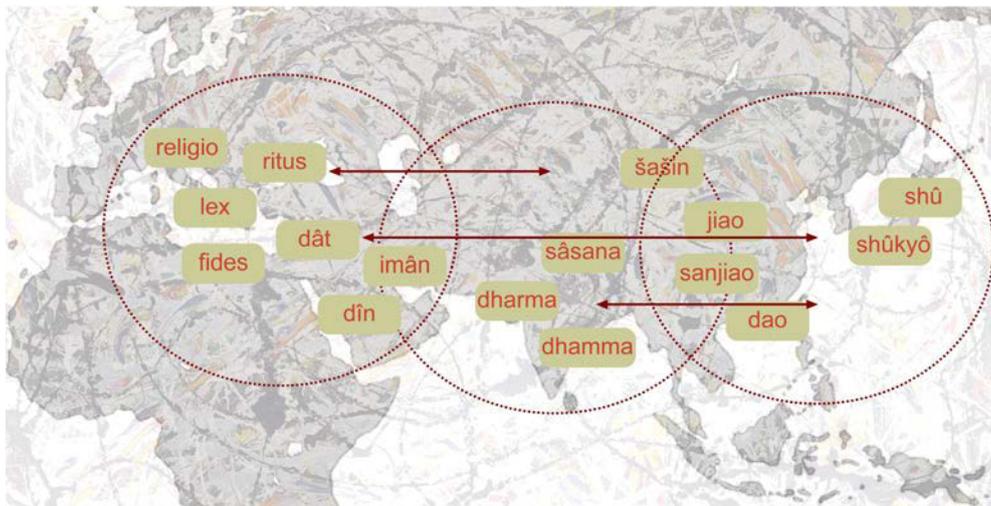
With intensified diachronic and synchronic encounter object-linguistic concepts arise. When analyzing the conceptual impacts of contact, it is important to consider the following:

First, we should include family resemblances in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein to get a broader spectrum of

meaning. E.g., the term “religio” that develops in the Latin world includes a semantic overlapping with other notions such as “lex”, “ritus” and “fides”. The relation between dhamma and sâsana might serve as an example für the Pali context, and the relation between “dîn” and “imân” for the Arabic context.

Second, we cannot isolate the meaning of single terms, but have to analyze them in relation to other contrasting notions. E.g., we are only able to cover the meaning of the Latin “religio”, if we look at its relation to opposed terms, for instance to “superstitio” on the one hand and “scientia” on the other.

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When analyzing interactions between concepts and the respective practice that they cover, we are able to identify regional religious fields such as the

Mediterranean, the South and Central Asian, and the East Asian field. However, none of the fields – like any field – are isolated, but interact with others. The Indian and Chinese Rites Controversies in Early Modern Times are only most prominent examples of such encounters with impacts on object-linguistic concepts and practice.

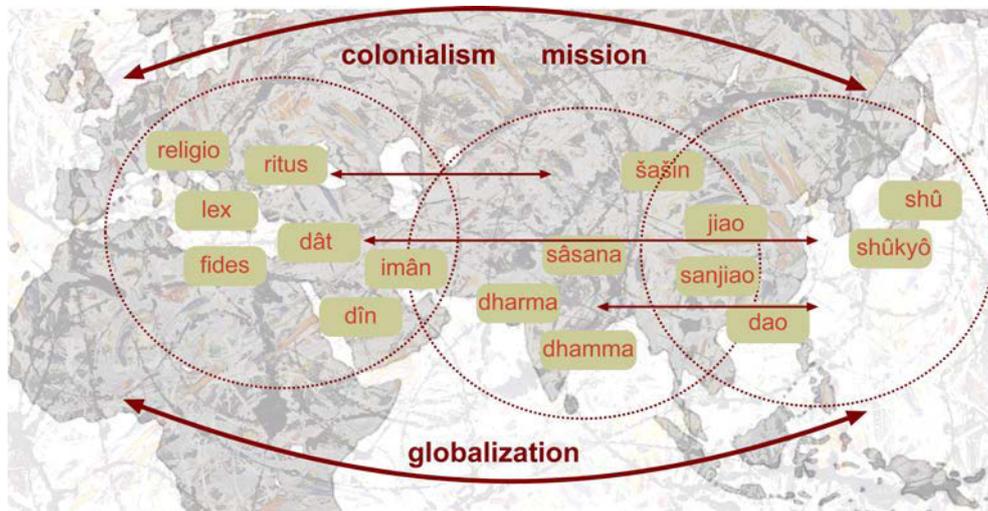
Of course, differences occur within these interactions. E.g., while “lex” stresses the ethical and legal dimension, “jiao” and later “sanjiao” accentuate the dimension of teaching. But despite of these differences all of the mentioned terms are in a mutual dependency, because they are related to each other by translation, contrasting, homogenization and other ways of comparison.

The emergence of generic concepts in the history of religions is most relevant to academic research. With regard to the relationship between empirical object- and scientific metalanguage, I suggest the following hypotheses:

1. Metalanguage can best correspond with religious-historical material and avoid a sterile scientism when it links in with the reflection, in which an object-linguistic awareness of the religious arises and is actively promoted.
2. The inner-religious reflection is always fostered when

- a) handed-down traditions become thematic, and thus compiled, reformed or rejected (this is diachronically stimulated religious reflection), and
- b) when religious traditions come into contact with others (this is synchronically stimulated religious reflection).

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The interaction frequency between different religious traditions and respective concepts gets enhanced in Early Modern and Modern Times and exceeds regional religious fields, mainly forced by colonialism, mission activities, and processes of globalization.

And this is the time when a global religious field starts to emerge. The impact of colonialism, nation state building, transnationalization and globalization on the history of religions is of course a huge topic. Much research

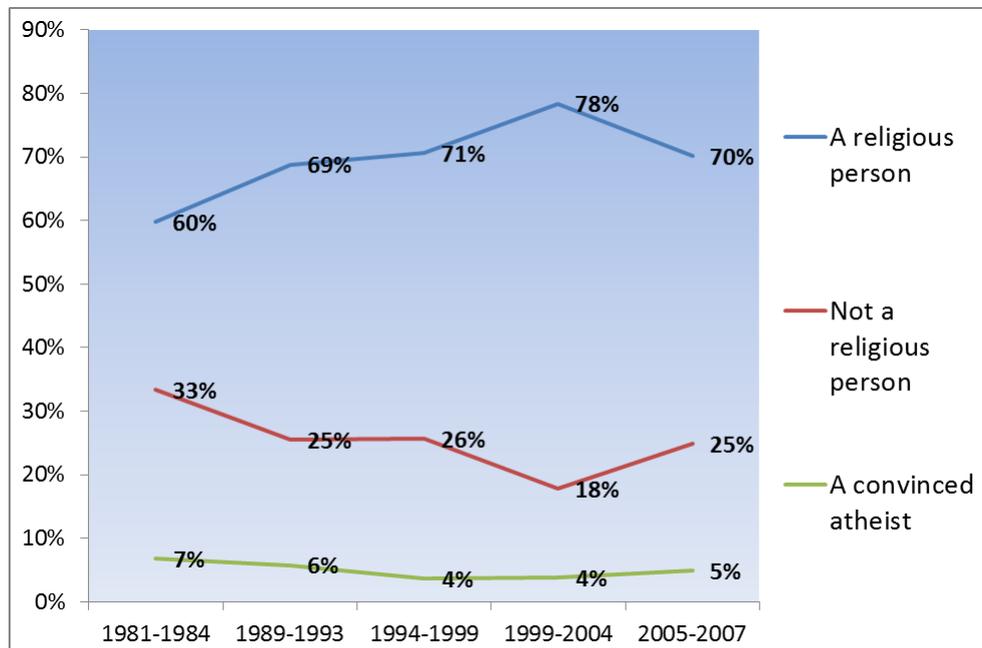
already has been conducted in this respect. One of the most important results consists of the fact that the Western notion of religion has not simply been exported to other regions, but similar concepts in the sense of family resemblances already existed in other parts of the world, and interactions between different concepts have covered and still cover repercussions. This is an indicator for the emergence of a global religious field starting in Early Modern Times. In the following third part, I will however restrict myself to some observations on recent developments.

3. Developments of a global religious field in recent times

As I said in the beginning, it is important to consider the distinction between inner and outer boundaries when following a field approach. I will start with observations on the inner boundaries of a global religious field.

a. Inner boundaries

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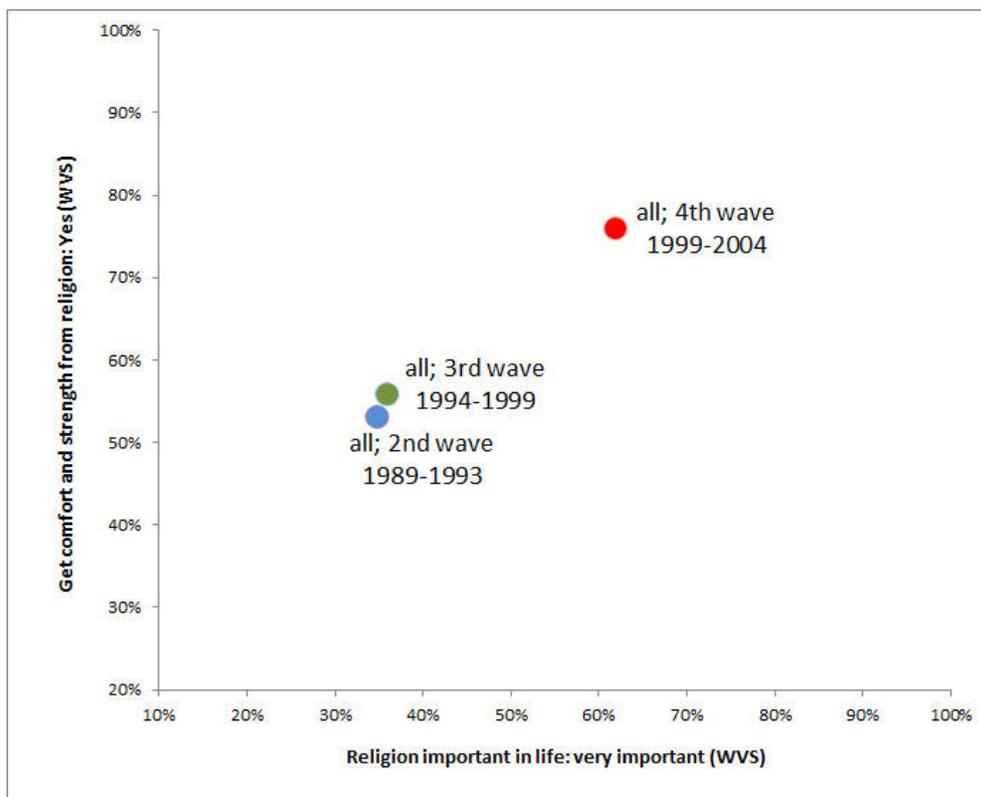


The term religion respectively the attribute religious and its translation into other languages seem to be accepted in many parts among the world population. I take the findings of the World Values Survey as an indicator for this. The survey has been conducted in five waves between 1981 and 2008 and includes 80 countries and almost 260,000 respondents. More than 99% per cent of the respondents gave an answer to the question whether they consider themselves either as a religious person, not as a religious person, or as a convinced atheist. On this slide you can see the distribution. Between 1981 and 2004 the amount of respondents who consider themselves as a religious person inclines and the sum of those who do not consider themselves as a religious

person declines accordingly; the amount of convinced atheists is more or less constant around 5 per cent.

These findings might serve as an indicator for the fact that the global religious field has become larger at the level of individuals. This – among other reasons – might be caused by the decline of political ideologies after 1989, and religion is becoming an identity marker that overlays other identity factors such as culture, ethnicity, and political attitudes.

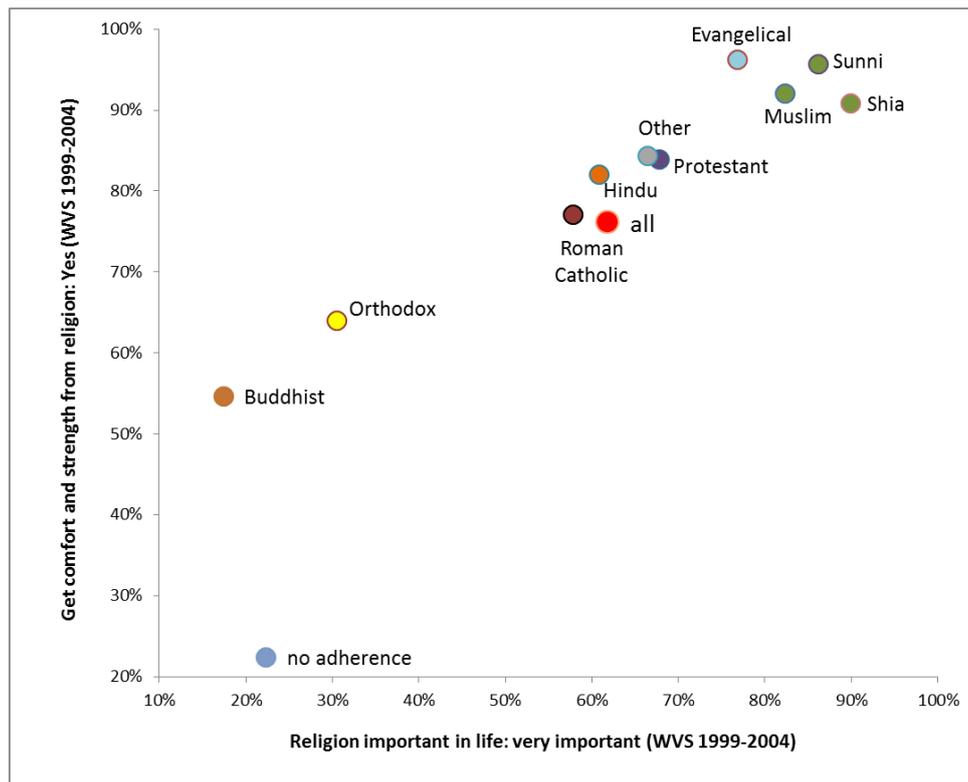
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Not only do more people consider themselves as a religious person, but also the importance of religion, as you can see on the x-axis of this diagram, and the

comfort and strength people get from their religion has risen, as you can see on the y-axis. Thus, the global religious field does not only get larger, but also stronger.

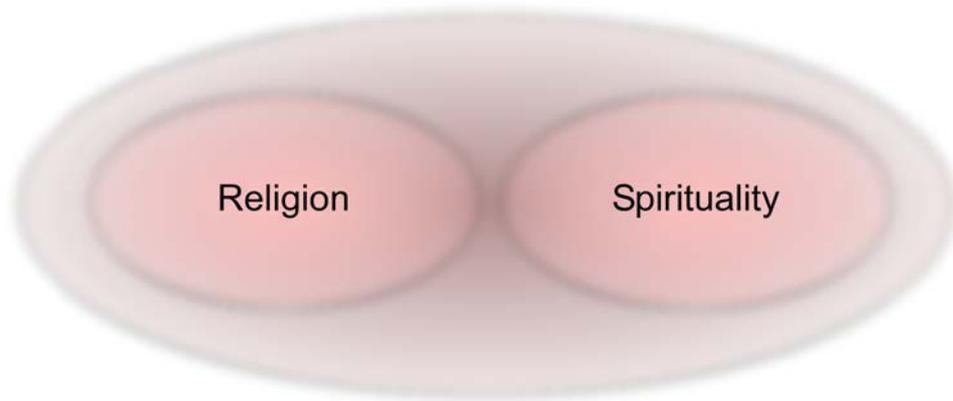
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However, there are denominational differences. According to the fourth wave of the World Values Survey conducted between 1999 and 2004, religion is much more important in life and has a deeper impact for Muslim and Evangelical respondents than for Buddhists and members of Orthodox churches or those who do not adhere to any denomination. Roman Catholics, Hindus, and Protestants are situated near the average.

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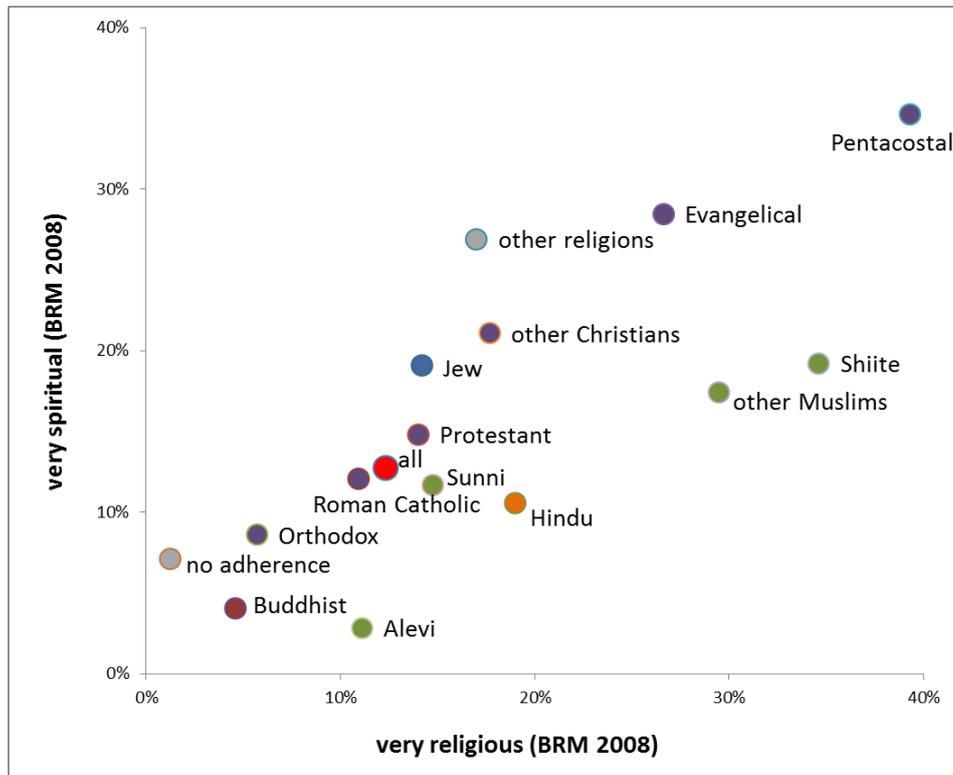
RELIGIOUS FIELD



Next to denominational differences or perhaps even beyond them, the global religious field may begin to be structured by the distinction between religion and spirituality. This has been assumed by scholars such as Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. Their definition of spirituality in difference to religion is inspired by Charles Taylor, who postulates a massive subjective turn of modern culture, a turning away from “‘life-as’ ([that means, e.g.*] life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to ‘subjective-life’ ([that means*] life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation).” According to Heelas and Woodhead, the language of ‘life-as’ and ‘subjective-life’ enables us to redefine the relation between religion and spirituality by differentiating between ‘life-as religion’ and ‘subjective-life-spirituality’.

However, is there an object-linguistic evidence for this academic distinction?

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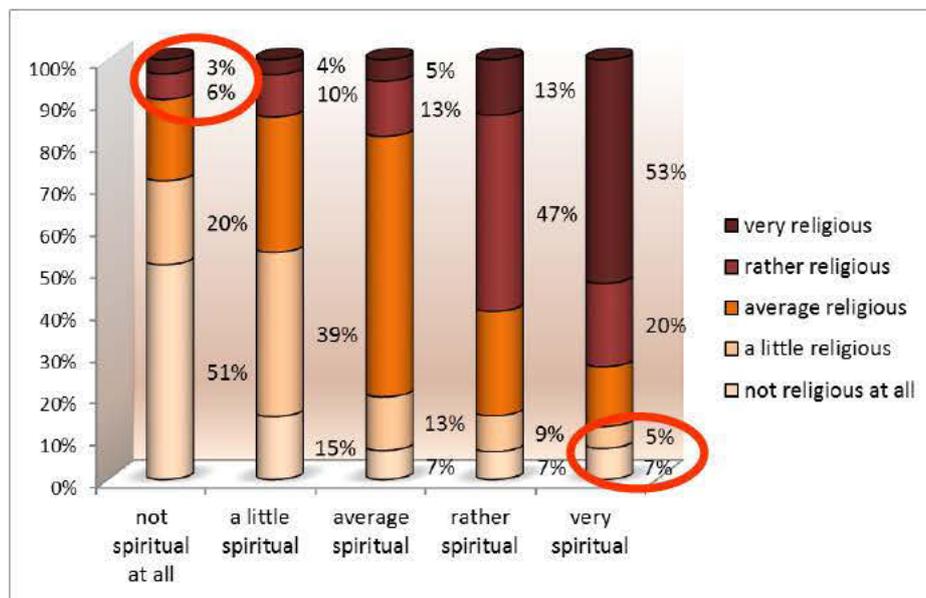
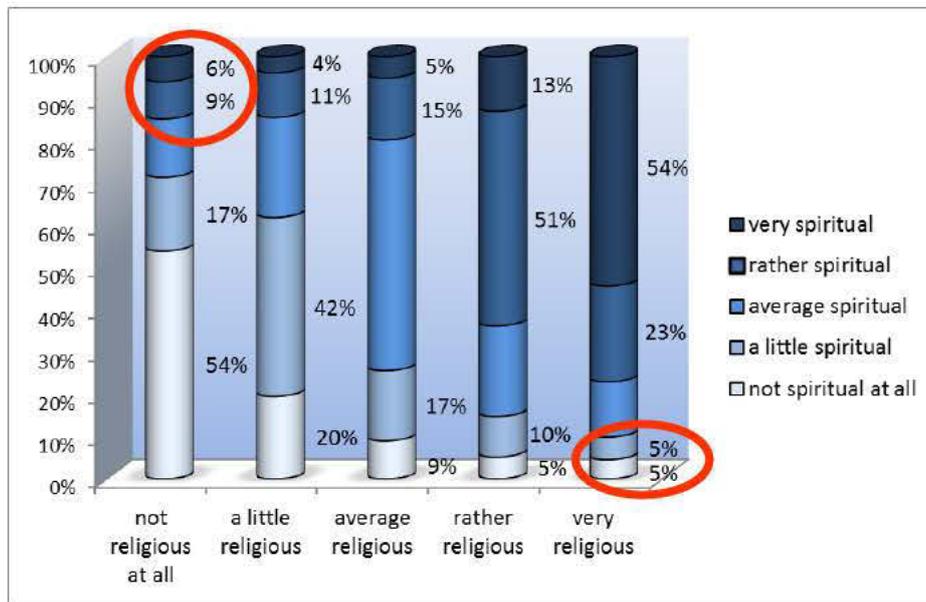
The Bertelsmann Religion Monitor that has been conducted in 2008 in 21 countries³ includes questions both on religiosity and spirituality. First of all, the findings show more or less the same pattern as the World Values Survey data: Significantly more Pentacostals, Evangelicals, and Muslims – with the exception of Sunnis und Alevis – consider themselves as very religious than Buddhists, members of Orthodox churches, and respondents without any adherence, while

³ Australia, Austria, Brazil, Germany, France, Great Britain, Guatemala, Italy, Israel, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey and the USA.

Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Hindus are situated near the average.

Secondly, and this is my point, religiosity quite strongly correlates with spirituality.

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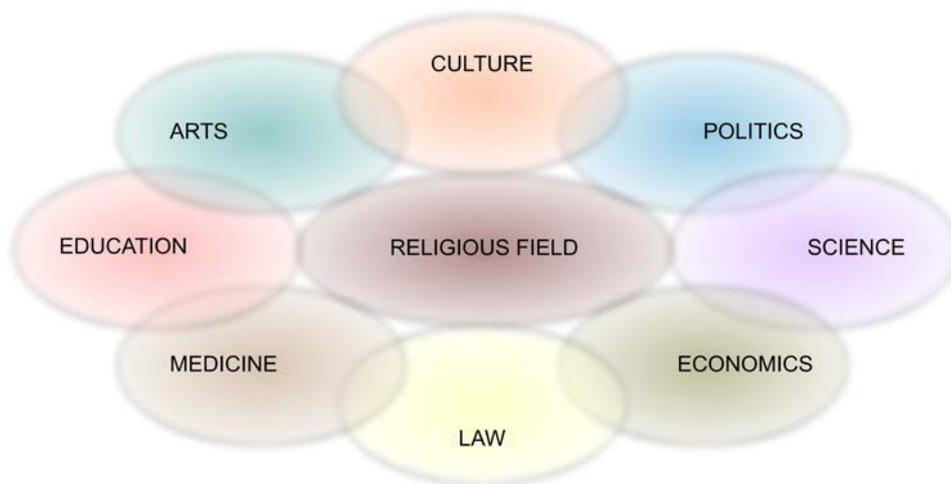
Most of the respondents who are religious combine – at least to a certain degree – religiosity with spirituality,

and vice versa. Only about 10 per cent make a clear alternative distinction between the two terms.

While the scholarly claimed transformation from religion to spirituality does not seem to have much statistical evidence, work at the outer boundaries of the global religious field, i.e., the relation between religion and other societal fields, may be of importance. I turn to this topic now in the final part of my talk.

b. Outer boundaries

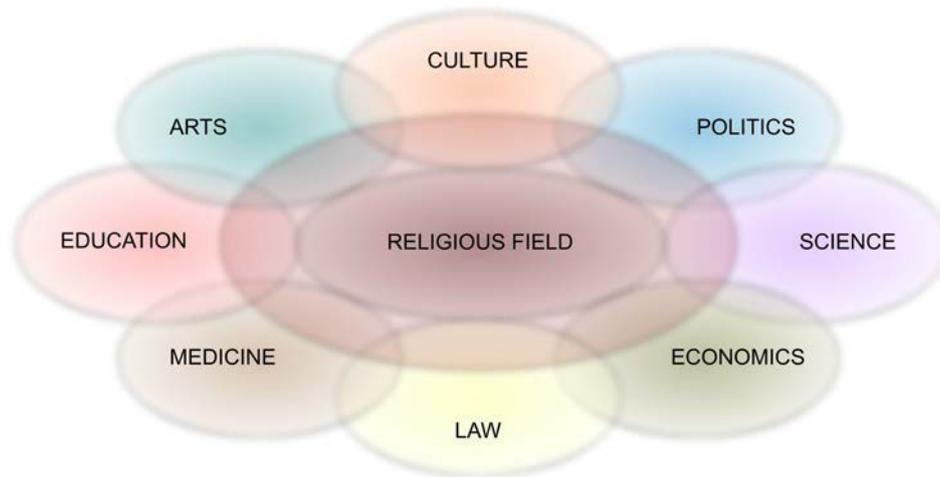
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First of all it is important to consider that, although the global religious field emerges by differentiating itself from other societal fields, it interacts with them; distinction does not mean separation or isolation. Maybe this is a reason for misunderstandings in the criticism of theories of societal differentiation.

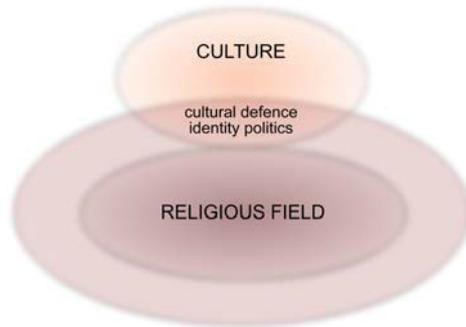
Secondly, societal differentiation is not a unilinear process with a point of no return. It starts in ancient times, is still continuing, and is not irreversible.

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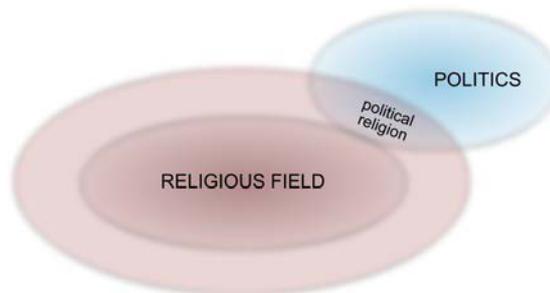


Looking at the global scale, we are witnessing blurring boundaries between religion and other societal fields. But this does not necessarily mean that religion is dissolving. Religion proceeds as a distinct field and intersects with other fields at the same time, as this figure intends to show.

Due to reasons of time I have to restrict myself to some very rough examples and hints.

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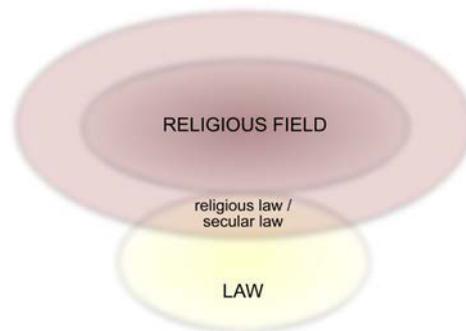
Religion does not merge with the entire cultural sphere (otherwise cultures as such would be religious), but interferes with it. What is known as the religious dimension in processes of cultural defence and identity politics is an example for this intersection.

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The intersection between religion and politics in the shape of political religion is of course a big issue. Election campaigns in the USA – as the entire American history – is a prominent example of this. However, the interference between religion and politics can only

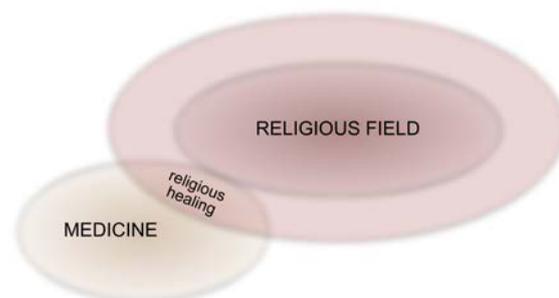
happen, if both fields proceed distinguished from each other. A political party convention is not the same as a religious service.

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We are also observing an intersection between religion and law. For instance, the headscarf, circumcision, and the cross in the classroom are polysemic and polyvalent; they might be and are both a religious and a legal issue.

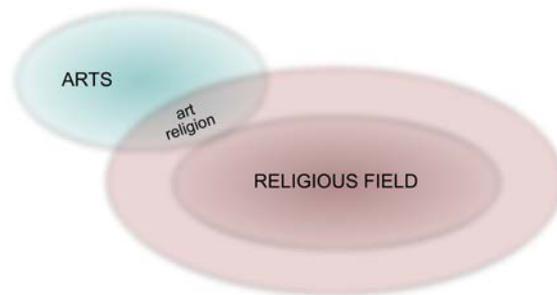
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Furthermore, religion intersects with medicine, not only in pre-modern, but also in contemporary times. Due to

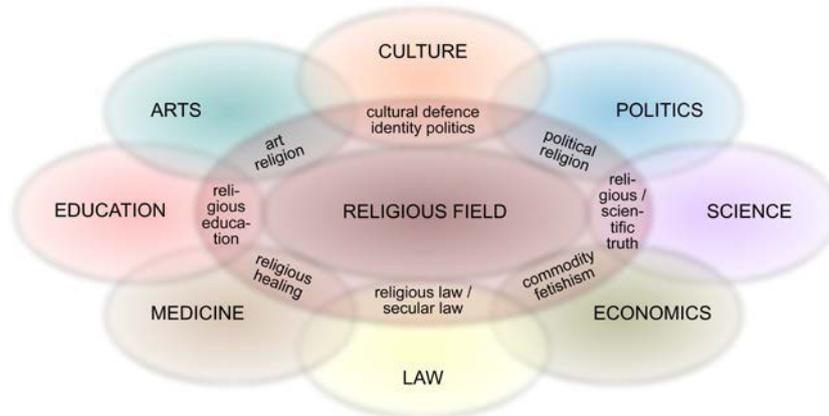
the limits of academic medicine, alternative practices with religious elements nowadays enhance to a certain extent. However, the blurring boundaries do not lead to the entire merging of the two fields.

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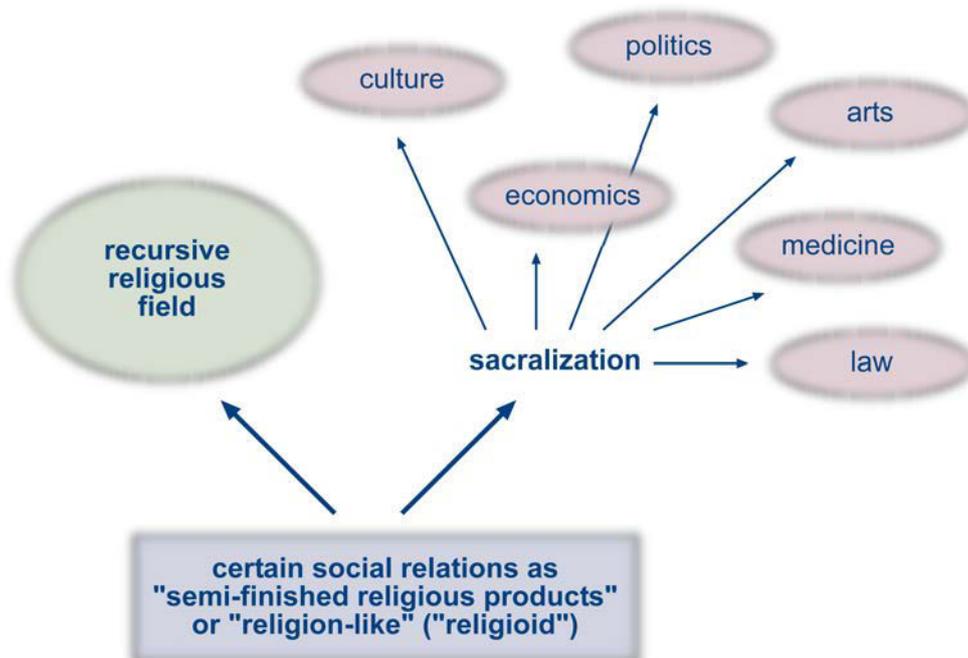
Last, but not least, religion interferes with the arts in the shape of art religion. I have placed only three examples out of many on this slide – ranging from Caspar David Friedrich via Francis Bacon to Madonna. It however makes a difference if religion refers to art within the religious field, or if religious elements are used within the field of arts, or if religion and arts merge in the shape of art religion.

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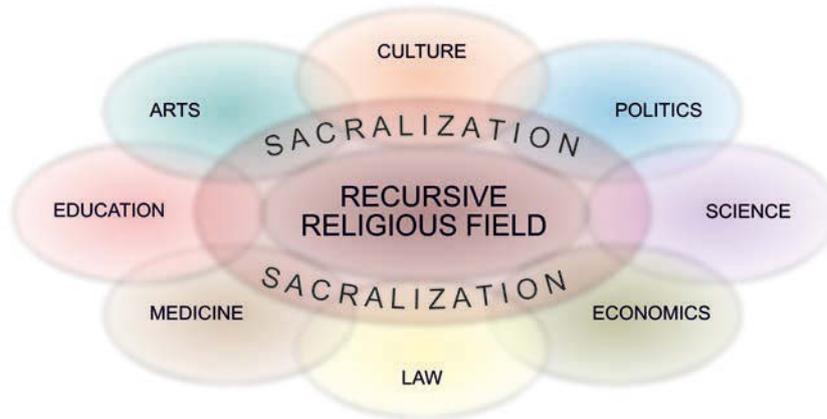
In short: Observing blurring boundaries between religion and other societal fields does not necessarily mean that religion is dissolving. Intersection needs differentiation as a basis, not only logically, but also empirically.

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As I said earlier, the process of differentiation is permanently being consolidated as well as changed through interactions between different societal fields. In order to consider both processes of differentiation and interfering I suggest distinguishing between recursive religion on the one hand and processes sacralization on the other. Both start at an undifferentiated level. Following on from Georg Simmel, a certain kind of social relations constitutes a disposition from which religion can evolve as a field of its own; they are, as Simmel calls them, "semi-finished religious products" ("religiöse Halbprodukte") or religion-like ("religioid"). Sacralization is the other direction that religion-like social relations can take.

Whatever is being sacralized has already been defined by another rationality (for instance, by political rule or the economic desire to sell and own possessions), which, however, is not sufficient or felt to be sufficient. Therefore the politically, economically or however else it may happen to be defined issue is additionally enriched with an aura of the unavailable and inescapable by using religious elements. In recursive religion, by contrast, non-religious matters may be negotiated, but not in order to additionally *enrich* them, but to *fill* them completely with religious meaning. A political or economic rationality is converted into a religious one in this case.

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Sacralization is thus the blurred boundary and interface between religion and other societal fields. I suggest taking the distinction between recursive religion and processes of sacralization into account historically and interculturally. This conceptual difference has the advantage of considering the distinct and the blurred boundaries equally and enables us to analyze religion-like processes before and beyond distinguished religion.