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Relating Theology and Religious Studies: Reflections on the German Academic Landscape

Johann Hafner

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Abstract: The ongoing decrease of membership and influence of the mainline Christian churches in Germany provokes the question of whether Christian theological departments should continue to have a predominant position at state universities guaranteed by the constitution and state-church treaties. This situation is exacerbated when universities refuse to hire competent candidates for theological departments because they lack the required denominational profile. Further, there is a widening gap in student numbers between denominationally driven theological departments, and religious studies departments that also cover non-Christian religions, despite the fact that they share methodologies and theories, especially in philological and historical research. So this article tries to describe the relation between the disciplines of theology and religious studies in a more complex way. It uses a system-theoretical approach to show that theology addresses the problem of self-application, which religious studies cannot solve alone. Why do religious studies focus on *religious* studies? It argues that the discipline of theology can be integrated into religious studies departments.

Keywords: theology at universities, theology in Germany, religious studies, Luhmann, systems theory

Study of Religion

Let me start with a preliminary clarification: I will use the term *study of religion* in order to encompass very different disciplines, including theology, religious studies, and all other fields that deal with questions of religion, like Indology, the sociology of religion, the philosophy of religion, etc. In the German language, the academy has coined a new term for this: *religionsbezogene Wissenschaften* or “religion-related sciences.” It came into use after the report of the Wissenschaftsrat (the National German Council of Science and Humanities) published its “Recommendations on the Advancement of Theologies and Sciences Concerned with Religions at German Universities.”¹

It seems that society at large perceives all these different and sometimes competing disciplines as one single religious field, even though, in the academy, they are exclusive of each other.² At any rate, general public discourse rarely

makes a distinction between religious communication per se and communication about religion, that is, general social discourse does not distinguish between emic and etic positions.³ That is why TV talk shows may invite a psychologist, a bishop, and a theologian to sit beside each other, and the viewers may not know that their positions are fundamentally different, or they may not know why those positions are (or should be) different. This whole phenomenon has to do with the process of differentiation: the more that disciplines become specialized, the more they become pooled into one field: the study of religion.

Here I will not explore the public's concept of "religion." Nor will I discuss the common object of studies. I don't want to tread the minefield of defining religion. I will simply say we have to accept that in public discourse the term *religion* serves as a common denominator. Attempts to avoid the word *religion* (because it is allegedly a Eurocentric colonization of the other) and to replace it by *culture* or *tradition* are futile, since *culture* or *tradition* are also just other Eurocentric, Latin, colonial terms.⁴ So let's just acknowledge that people with no religious affiliation, and quite often society at large, use the term *religion*. The word need not be seen as an essential concept. It signifies only that one is entering a special epistemic field.

New Situation: Two Competitors

The study of religion in Germany right now is characterized by two elements. The first is the competition between the two fields of religious studies and theology. There is a disparity in numbers in which theology departments have an overwhelming majority. There are only 27 full professors in religious studies, 15 in Jewish studies, and 32 in Islamic studies. On the other hand, there are 700 full professors in Protestant and Catholic theology. The difficulty with this asymmetry comes into greater relief when looking at the student numbers in the respective departments. Between 1985 and 2007 the student numbers in Protestant theology dropped by 44 per cent and in Catholic theology by 38 per cent.⁵ In contrast, the number of students in Jewish studies increased by 257 per cent, in Islamic studies by 62 per cent, and in religious studies by 74 per cent.

This asymmetry causes frictions, especially when an academic position is advertised as "religious studies," but is located within a faculty for theology at a state university. According to state-church treaties, candidates have to match the expectations of the church, which means that only Protestant or Catholic theologians are eligible for the positions (or in a recent case, Protestant candidates were expected to have a theological *degree*). After the academic hiring process, the Catholic bishop or the Protestant regional church has the right to accept or turn down the faculty's proposal. In order to avoid

direct confrontation, many faculties anticipate the expectations of the churches by choosing only fitting candidates. This distorts free selection of the best. One remedy would be for the deans of the German theological faculties to hire candidates from outside their own denomination and see what the reaction of their ecclesial authorities are. Wise bishops would allow for some non-denominational experts in "their" faculties. But so far, nobody has dared.

In addition, there must be more adjustment and greater coordination between the traditional, established Islamic and Judaism studies department and the newly erected institutes for Islamic theology (Frankfurt, Münster, Tübingen, and Erlangen) and for Jewish theology (Potsdam). In other words, these newer institutes will have to establish their own niche, keeping in mind that the Judaistik and Islamwissenschaft have a longer tradition in Germany. The claims between them were clearly defined by terminology: *studies*, as in the latter case of the older institutes, means "non-denominational" and *theology*, as in the former case, means "denominational."

Denominationality

But what do the terms *theology* and *denominational* actually denote? How do they alter a discipline? According to Kant, theology is not an *ars liberalis*, but a discipline that has a necessary and delineated function. This is why he places theology besides the two "higher" faculties, medical school and law school.⁶ Medicine cares for the body, jurisprudence takes care of society, and theology takes care of the soul. The function of these three upper faculties is to promote health, justice and faith. This is also why they have to follow the guidelines of non-academic authorities: the medical associations, the state, and the church. Further, these guidelines are clearly stated, respectively, in established medical procedures, legal laws, and the scriptures. Only in the "lower faculty," in the Philosophische Fakultät (College of Arts and Sciences) does free scholarship find its place. This is because there the disciplines have no particular and delineated external function (for society), but are engaged only in the pursuit of truth. Schleiermacher, whose influence in systematizing Protestant theology and its subdisciplines is second to none, expanded on that notion and linked all theological research to its contribution to pastoral functions (*Kirchenleitung*). Conservative bishops and sometimes even theologians⁷ continue this strategy even today. Simply put, then, the discipline of theology abides by external guidelines, but *artes liberales* allow one to inquire freely.

Canon-Bound

These historical positions and today's conservative clerics' manner of thinking lead to the rather simplistic assumption that theology is a function of the religious system and follows the distinctions "transcendent/immanent" or

"holy/profane." In contrast, religious studies is seen as a science that identifies the world in terms of a "true/false" code. Generally, the reference made here is to Niklas Luhmann's theory of binary codes, which he views as the basic grammar of social subsystems like religion or science.

Some use this theoretical description to keep the two disciplines clearly apart. But it is not that easy. Modern theology, as it is taught at German universities, is not a free academic discipline, nor does it execute religious prescriptions. A theology department is not a madrasa where students only memorize verses from the Qur'an. It is not like an orthodox yeshiva that may be caught up in casuistry or legalistic minutia. Nor is it like a Christian seminary where the practice of emotional preaching is the centrepiece of the program.⁸ Theology straddles two positions. On one hand, it does try to fulfil the expectations of the religious community it serves. On the other, it also has the responsibility to be self-critical and challenging to its community.⁹ Its function is, so to speak, to surprise its own authorities. Theologians analyze and criticize their own religion by applying categories taken from other fields, like *hypostasis/physis* (Gregory v. Nyssa), *actus/potentia* (Aquinas), and *Subjektivität* (Schleiermacher). Theology, in this sense, is objective and strives to integrate contemporary models into older religious paradigms. Thus it serves as an outside observation of religion inside religion.

One might say that even if theology maintains a critical distance from its denominational institutions, it is still bound by ritualistic and intellectual traditions, like the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch in orthodox Judaism or dogmas and the ritual in catholic Christianity. So even if an orthodox Jew or Catholic theologian were to introduce innovations, she or he would do so with reference to a more fundamental tradition.¹⁰

Initially, theology is defined as a discipline that reflects on certain canonical texts.¹¹ For instance, theological exegesis is not pure philology. It is the science of biblical texts that takes into account historical, sociological, and cultural contexts. But it is important to note here that even the canon and the idea of canonicity have come into question. To give a few examples: The Lutheran Bible contains not only holy scripture but also non-canonical apocrypha, which are considered canonical by the Catholics. The Coptic Bible contains the book of Enoch, which is rejected by most other churches. Newer work in biblical studies has also generated new editions¹² that add the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter. Likewise, Christian art is inspired not only by the Apocalypse of John but even more so by the Apocalypse of Peter. And just recently a Protestant theologian in Berlin questioned the canonicity of the Old Testament altogether.¹³

In short, then, theology widens the scope of the textual traditions of its religion. If we look into the scholarly work of Jewish and Christian theologians today, we must admit that theology in many ways has become much more like cultural studies. Exegetical methods are like those used in philology. Systematic theology has taken on the contours of philosophy. Practical theology

uses the methods of sociology, etc. Apart from its already very loose canonical-denominational orientation, theology is very much like religious studies in methodology and in theory. Theology today is mostly religious studies about Christianity. There is only one exception: moral theology. This subdiscipline is essentially normative and resists translation into historical or sociological categories.

Integration

Since academic theology is getting so close to religious studies, a new model of relating the two fields is called for. Usually scholars use an inside-outside categorization in a wide variety of ways. Here the proposal is to use another model, which is taken from Luhmann's systems theory. I will briefly outline it below.¹⁴

Each system consists of two main relations: toward the irritations caused by its environment and toward its own operations (*Fremdreferenz* and *Selbstreferenz*). It has to anticipate external conditions and to deal with them. At the same time it has to maintain its internal functions. In German these two sets are referred to as *Fremdreferenz* and *Selbstreferenz* of a system regarding its environment.

These processes lead to stabilization or destabilization. Instability is not bad but could lead to further evolution by interrupting continuity. For institutions and societies, destabilization arises when the following two questions come up: First, why do we do what we do, and not something else?—the problem of contingency. How can you justify with scientific arguments the fact that you do research and not sell products? And second: Why are there internal differences, negations, contradictions, and not just affirmations?—the problem of consistency.

From the two relations (environment/system, stability/instability) we derive four categories: contingency/consistency, external reference/self-reference and cross them (see Table 1). These are the three aspects under which a system can be observed, as Luhmann mentioned in *Soziale Systeme*: differences in time and order (*Zeitdimension*), differences in elements and topics (*Sachdimension*), and differences of roles and authorities (*Sozialdimension*).¹⁵

One can easily relate the three aspects to three main approaches in religious studies:

- Historical (also psychological) research about developments, phases, perceptions
- Phenomenological (also comparative) research about motives, places, media
- Sociological (also economical) research about interactions, groups, organizations

TABLE 1

In/stability environment/system	Problems of contingency	Problems of consistency
Relation to environment	A: Material dimension	C: Social dimension
Relation to own system	B: Temporal dimension	D:

Position A, the problem of contingency with regard to the environment, leads to questions of elements and its positions on them—the material dimension. Why do other systems use other/similar elements?

Position B, the problem of contingency with regard to the present system, leads to questions of earlier and later—the temporal dimension. Why are there changes?

Position C, the question of consistency with regard to environment, leads to assertions of roles and positions—the social dimension. This is how and why we (and not the others) act like this!

TABLE 2

	Problems of contingency	Problems of consistency
Relation to environment	A: Phenomenological comparison	C: Sociological analysis
Relation to own system	B: Historical research	D:

No doubt these three main disciplines are familiar, since they are similar to what Jaques Waardenburg proposed for religious studies: history of religion, phenomenology of religion, and social contextualization of religion (see Table 2).¹⁶

Table 2 leaves the quadrant D empty: the question of consistency in one's own system: what is the object of self-reference beyond and beside its material, temporal, and social conditions? It is the question each system hides, because that is its blind spot. It occurs whenever you apply your categories to the categories. For instance, in ethics is it morally good to distinguish between good and bad? Or in science, is the scientific distinction of true versus false true or false? This is the paradox of reflection as such, whenever thinking tries to grasp what its own thought and acts are. The fourth quadrant D denotes the place where the religious system observes itself. For example, is the religious distinction of transcendent and immanent transcendent or immanent? The question presents a dilemma: if the answered is "transcendent," religious thought has its roots in an otherworldly inspiration and cannot be communicated to persons who are not inspired. This would be a rather gnostic solution. If the answered is "immanent," religious thought is understood to be secular research and cannot communicate why these thoughts are religious. These paradoxes of self-application cannot be solved by appealing to something from the outside that determines meaning. They can be resolved only by making a decision. It is a decision that has no other reason except the fact that you do what you do. The act of drawing a distinction, which Luhmann sees as the primordial operation of all personal knowledge and systemic information, is a decision to do so. So we need another discipline as the decision-maker and decision-defender.

In my opinion, theology qualifies. Theology has always been a discipline moderating scientific requirements (consistency) and religious self-definitions (self-referentiality). It has a long history of attempting to convey the absolute in relative terms, and in dealing with heteronomy and autonomy. The task of theology in this model would be to interrupt the chain of doubts and contingencies by a confession: I do what I do, because the world needs my research (higher material logic), or because a God called me (higher social logic), or because history evolved me (higher temporal logic).¹⁷ It is, so to speak, controlled fundamentalism. In field D, all the "why" and "what" questions could be worked off, like the constantly surfacing doubts about what constitutes religion, what categories we have to delimit our scope, and why we are a discipline and not part of sociology or history departments? So field D would do the work and thus unburden the three other quadrants. They can follow their business and delegate the why question to field D. In this regard, theology is the self-observation of religious studies. Its function is to reflect on the irrational preference of a certain discipline and its basic distinctions. Field D has to justify why the other fields have a limited scope of attention (that we do research on certain objects—topics, roles, developments—and no other). Luhmann would say one has to pay the costs of selection.

Consequence

What are the consequences of such a rather abstract model? It is the unspectacular proposal that division we see between theological institutions and religious studies institutions could be transformed, with good epistemological reasons, into one field of research. This model suggests the establishment of departments of the study of religion, where theology plays a central role, but with a clear division of labour. The church historians will move to quadrant B, while the pastoral theologians to quadrant C and will cooperate with historians and sociologists. The theologians in Germany might reject this as a humiliating subordination. Why should the twenty-six faculties of theology and the seventy-six institutes of theology integrate themselves into another overarching structure? They probably will continue to refer to state guarantees.

But we can predict today that student numbers in the theological institutions will continue to decrease. And state guarantees will erode as well. So better think today about a structure for tomorrow.

Notes

- 1 Wissenschaftsrat, *Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen* (Berlin, 2010) www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/9678-10.pdf.
- 2 The term *religious field* is usually used as a sociological category to describe the realm of explicit and implicit religious semantics and structures. It can also be applied on the second-order level: all communications about religion, be they critical, affirmative or normative.

- 3 Similarly, the public doesn't distinguish between economy and economics as well: from a distance, both are first- and second-order communications in the same realm.
- 4 Of course there is always a more abstract way to say things: Why not replace "ritual" by "action," "myth" by "narration"? But "action" and "narration" can comprise anything. But we are interested in indicating *special* actions: religious actions, and not non-religious actions. In order to be keep its capacity to deal with objects, religious studies need generalized concepts like "ritual" or "prayer." These concepts can be aggregated to even more general genera like "traditions" or "representations." At a certain point they culminate in an ultimate concept. Not historically, but systematically it is unimportant, if this *Letztbegriff* is rendered in Latin (like *religio*) or with some other word. It need not be filled with any content at all, since it consists of abstract genera. It is no more a descriptive but a functional concept to circumscribe the horizon of interest against other uninteresting fields like botanics. Of course a scholar may do research on plants in the Rig Veda, but she does so only because they occur in the Rig Veda. *Numen* or *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* would not accept an article on agriculture during the Ashoka period if it lacks any reference to Buddhism, or an article on Jewish garments without relating it to Halacha. So by its sheer practice of publication, religious studies presupposes a functional concept of religion.
- 5 Since faculties have their *raison d'être* in the formation of clergy, low student numbers (in 2007 only 110 ordinations, in 2014 only 110 entries in German Catholic seminaries) threaten their existence. See Stephan Orth, "Fakultäten suchen die Öffentlichkeit," *Herder Korrespondenz* 69 (2015): 117–119.
- 6 See Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, ed. Horst D. Brandt and Piero Giordanetti (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2005).
- 7 See keynote of Paul Griffiths, "Theological Disagreement," at the Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, San Diego, May 2014, in which he determined theology as the practice of reflection on "God." Catholic theology should reflect the Lord as the doctrinal self-gift including the syntax for how to speak about him. Theologians have to execute three tasks: to discover what constitutes the Church's lexicon (scripture), to interpret by making suggestions on different or implicit doctrines (e.g., bodies of angels), and to speculate, free of restraint, on questions about which scripture has nothing to say. But Catholic theology should not speculate on what it means to be Catholic. This is as unproductive as discussing the rules while playing chess.
- 8 See Rolf Schieder, "Vom Nutzen der Theologie in einem säkularen Umfeld," in *Theologie(n) an der Universität*, ed. Walter Homolka and Hans-Gert Pöttering (Berlin: deGruyter, 2013), 14.
- 9 If we look back in history, we observe that theologians became more and more detached from basic religious-clerical duties: a scholastic theologian like Thomas Aquinas, member of the Dominican order, had to pray seven times a day. The humanist theologian Erasmus was a monk, who left his monastery living the life of an international professional scholar. The liberal theologian Adolf Harnack was a state official, who had no prayer obligations. Theologians shifted from religious virtuosi to professional researchers.
- 10 See Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011); Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Greater Judaism in the Making: A Study of Modern Evolution of Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967).
- 11 Every subdiscipline can be traced back to the canonical text: Morals/halakha are based on the normative passages of the Bible. Church/Jewish history is the history of those who consider the Bible their holy book.
- 12 Klaus Berger and Christiane Nord, *Das Neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1999).
- 13 See Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Hiobs Botschaft," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/kann-man-das-alte-testament-einfach-streichen-13558589.html>.

- 14 The following section is a condensed version of my "Theologie und Religionswissenschaft. Ein Vorschlag zur Integration jener in diese," in *Katholische Theologie an der Universität. Situation und Zukunft*, ed. Joachim Schmiedl and Johann Hafner, 98–119 (Ostfildern: Schwaabenverlag, 2009).
- 15 Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), esp. 111–127.
- 16 Jaques J. Waardenburg, *Religionen und Religion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986).
- 17 Without a "higher logic," a system is left to arbitrariness: "Because I like it." Such subjective self-affirmation raises the critique that you are doing research with no reason, just following your taste (*Geschmacksurteil*). Of course, Nietzsche has challenged science by replacing the distinction of true/false with noble/common taste, but system as a system of critique, reviews, and acknowledgment by colleagues doesn't allow for empty spontaneity. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Kritische Studienausgabe VI, 2 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1999), esp. "Was ist vornehm?"