

Tomáš Bubík and Henryk Hoffmann (eds)

Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened: The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe

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Reviewed by Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Croatia

Since its formation in the late 19th century, Religious Studies, as an academic field or discipline, has been devoted to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches. Robert Segal, one of the most prominent scholars of Religious Studies, described it as a “subject focused [and] open to as many approaches as are prepared to study it” (Segal, 2006, xvii). It is clear, therefore, that Religious Studies is a very heterogeneous and broad scientific field that encompasses different (and not always compatible) approaches.

The authors of the book *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened*, edited by Tomáš Bubík and Henryk Hoffmann, have set the task of giving historiographical reviews of the development and formation of the academic study of religions in selected Eastern European countries, namely the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine. This task is by no means simple, because its intent is to reveal the interconnectedness of the field with social, historical, ideological, cultural and political factors during turbulent changes of governing structures and dominant ideological influences. A key selection criterion was the membership of the national institutions in the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) and the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), which indicates, according to the editors, that the level of institutional development of the discipline was confirmed through international cooperation. The book was published as a part of the international project *Development of the Study of Religions in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century*, supported by the Czech Science Foundation.

Chapter 1 is titled “The Czech Journey to the Academic Study of Religions: From the Critique of Religion to Its Study” and was written by Tomáš Bubík, who starts with a historical overview of the religious situation in Czech lands. According to Bubík, today’s high levels of undeclared and nonbelieving Czechs (80%) are a result of specific historical events, which disrupted the usual pattern of forming national consciousness that emerged from religion. This academic study of religions in Czech lands starts in the 19th century, when the dualistic approach—theological and secular—can be observed in disputes over the definition of religion, question of origin, methodological approach and more. Scholars sought to establish the field as independent, introduced it to the academic world and created the first generation of scientists. However, the development of the field was interrupted with the establishment of Communism and the acceptance of Marxist-Leninist ideology that rejected not only religion but also “bourgeois pseudo-science of study of religions” (p. 28). Even in the Communist era, the theological approach to Religious Studies was present, which was an important fact for the re-establishment of the field after the fall of Communism. The main challenges for the Religious Studies in the Czech Republic during the post-Communist period were defining its border toward theology and insisting on firm methodological and scientific agnosticism.

David Václavík wrote Chapter 2, “Searching and Finding: A History of the Slovak Study of Religion.” In it, Václavík distinguishes three different periods of the field in Slovakia: pre-formative (until 1945), formative (1945–1992) and institutionally systematized (since 1992). After the political and cultural emancipation from Hungary and the formation of

Czechoslovakia in 1918, the specific Slovak national identity, which relies heavily on religion as its main component, started to take shape. This pre-formative period is thus characterized by authors who launched their works from theological instead of objective scientific positions. The formative period started with the establishment of Communist Czechoslovakia and the predominance of scientific atheism. During this period, Ján Komorovský developed a systematic theoretical and methodological approach to religion and he became a key figure in the formation of the field in Slovakia. His success in establishing Religious Studies as a new field at Comenius University in Bratislava in 1992 marked the beginning of the third, or institutionally systematized, period.

In the Chapter 3, “The Development of Religious Studies in Poland: History and the Present State,” Henryk Hoffmann differentiates five stages in the development of the field. The first phase lasted from the end of 18th century up to the second half of the 19th century and was heavily influenced by the Western Enlightenment. The second phase, from the second half of the 19th century until 1918, was characterized by ideological debates about religion and science, the origin of religion and its sociological and psychological causes. The third phase comprises the inter-war period (1918–1939) during which the research of religion was advancing, but Religious Studies was still not recognized as an independent academic field. This recognition was achieved in the fourth phase, which refers to the Communist period (1945–1990), when the field was institutionalized. The last phase, or contemporary period, began in 1990 and is ongoing. This period is marked by not only the rejection of Marxism as the principal ideological position but also an openness to academic pluralism. The main methodological approach is phenomenology, especially the new research orientation that the author calls “morphology of daily life” (p. 111).

András Máté-Tóth and Csaba Máté Sarnyai present, in Chapter 4 “The History and Recent Trends of ‘Religionswissenschaft’ in Hungary,” the first systematic overview of the history of Religious Studies in Hungary. The authors begin with a review of the discipline during the four historical periods of the social sciences in Hungary (liberal, nationalist, atheist and pluralist) and proceed with a review of all significant scholars in Religious Studies from each period. In the “liberal period” (from the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 until the end of WWI), Religious Studies formed as a separate discipline with its own theoretical and methodological approaches. The second (or “national”) period (1920–1950) is characterized by attempts in Hungary to shape its identity as a Christian nation state. Scholars dealt specifically with the history of religions, which they approached from different theoretical perspectives. The third period (“atheistic”) lasted from 1950 until 1990 and is marked by the imposed institutional atheism. The main interests of scholars included the history of ancient religions (comparative mythology) and the sociological research of contemporary religiosity. The current (“pluralist”) period, which started in 1990 and is ongoing, has brought a heightened interest in Religious Studies and a further institutionalization of the field.

In Chapter 5, “Estonian Study of Religion: A Historical Outline of the 20th Century Developments,” Ülo Valk and Tarmo Kulmar start by identifying three different directions in which Religious Studies developed in Estonia: interest in the church and Christianity, Oriental studies and Indology, and research into ethnic religions and pre-Christian mythology. The authors follow these three research areas through different historical periods: from the Tsarist Empire to the end of WWI, from the independence of Estonia to the end of WWII, during the Communist period, and onward from the re-establishment of Estonia’s independence after 1990. As early as the first period, Estonian folk religion was established as the most important research area, and it became closely intertwined with the creation of an Estonian national identity. The second period was marked by major political and social turmoil, which resulted in the further ideologization of folk religion. In the period of Soviet Estonia, the ruling Communist Party regarded both institutional and vernacular religion as primitive beliefs that

had to be overcome. The Party's attitude toward folk beliefs was somewhat more benevolent, because they were perceived as pre-Christian and anti-clerical. After the fall of Communism, Religious Studies was revived and institutionalized as an autonomous scientific field. Research interests continued to develop in all three mentioned directions, but the area dealing with folk religion is, according to the authors, still the most active one, with researchers' focus shifting from past to present beliefs.

Jānis Priede authored Chapter 6, "Development of the Study of Religion in Latvia in the 20th Century." Priede tries to show that the course of development of the field in Latvia was continuous and discontinuous at the same time. Continuity can be traced from the pre-academic to the academic phase of the field through similar themes and interests of the leading scholars. From the 18th century onward, the main area of interest is Latvian mythology and folk religion. This scientific interest was carried into the 20th century with efforts to determine and define the Latvian folk religion more strictly in relation to neighboring nations. Nevertheless, the turbulent social and political events of the 20th century on several occasions interrupted the continuity of Religious Studies in Latvia. Once more, the most challenging period was ushered in by the establishment of the Communist state, with scientific atheism as its official ideology. However, scholars in exile continued their work and kept continuity of the field. After the breakdown of Communism, some scholars returned from exile and carried research interests and topics into the 21st century. Approaches to main topics changed over time but, similar to the situation in Estonia, folk religiosity remained the dominant interest of religious scholars in Latvia.

Liudmyla Fylypovych and Yuriy Babinov state in Chapter 7, "The History of the Scientific Study of Religion and Current State of Religious Studies in Ukraine," that even though Religious Studies in Ukraine was developing mostly within the framework of theology, as early as the pre-formative period (18th and 19th centuries), the first tendencies to formulate Religious Studies as a separate (secular) scientific field could be observed. The main research interests were the history of religion, pre-Christian beliefs and Slavic mythology ("Ukrainian Mythological School"). In the period after WWII, Religious Studies were under ideological pressure. However, after the collapse of Communism, the discipline was revived. In this part of the chapter, the authors elaborately present current trends in Religious Studies in Ukraine, starting with a description of the field in order to define it as a separate discipline with a distinct objective, to determine its mission and competence. After a conceptual designation of the discipline, the authors give an overview of current trends.

Chapter 8, with its intriguing title "The Outline of Religious Studies in Russia: Did Soviet Religious Studies Really Exist?" was written by Ekaterina Elbakyan. The author distinguishes four stages: from the second half of the 19th century to 1920, from 1920 to 1940, from 1950 to 1990 and from the mid-nineties onward. According to Elbakyan, the field of Religious Studies in Russia has been under great ideological pressure since its inception. In the first stage, this pressure influenced the choice of topics, which were related to archaic religions. In the second phase, practical efforts to suppress religion became more apparent. In the next period, from 1950 to 1990, the fundamental preoccupation of scholars was the theoretical and conceptual definition of scientific atheism, while Religious Studies was regarded as its indispensable component. The last phase, from the mid-nineties onward, has been characterized by the rejection of ideological barriers, by objectification and by the further institutionalization of the field. However, as the question in the title indicates, the author also considers the recent period to be faced with certain problems. In this regard, she points out that the question of religion has become widespread in public and hence often in danger of banalization and popularization that could result in the disappearance of Religious Studies in Russia as a serious scientific field. Elbakyan finishes the chapter with specific proposals that could help to avoid this scenario.

The authors of each chapter manage to describe the virtually idiosyncratic development of the field of Religious Studies in different countries, but they also show that apart from significant differences, there are some similarities, on the basis of which some overall patterns can be observed: Religious Studies was taken from the Western European framework in its authentic form under the strong influence of positivism, evolutionism and historicism (although later, in each historical, political and social context, it developed its original theoretical and methodological approaches); the experience of Communist history (albeit different from country to country) imposed certain inevitable principle similarities; whereas the collapse of the Communist system brought about the possibility for academic pluralization and openness. Furthermore, throughout these common historical eras, Religious Studies in Eastern European countries often was subjected to ideologizations and contested by militant secularism on the one hand and by apologetic theologies on the other.

In the Preface, the editors ask themselves if it would be “useful to spend research time and effort on investigating the history of an academic discipline, given the rapid growth of new information” and to what extent would it “contribute to the development of the discipline” (Bubík and Hoffmann, xiv). After reading the book, I would answer by saying that the significance of a meta-theoretical approach of this kind is not only in preserving the heritage or archiving historical theories. This compendium is also important as a recapitulation of the body of scientific approaches, because it points to the significance of creating a systematic corpus of knowledge. Further, it shows us once more, in accordance with the theory of continuity, that our knowledge is a result of the historical deposition of scientific notions albeit not in a straightforward and unbroken sequence.

REFERENCE

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