

Wanda Alberts  
Integrative Religious Education in Europe



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Wanda Alberts

# Integrative Religious Education in Europe

A Study-of-Religions Approach

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## Foreword

by Rosalind I. J. Hackett

In reading Wanda Alberts' lucid and engaging study of integrative religious education in Europe, one might be led to think that the notion of religious education is as contested a concept as that of religion itself. They are of course related, as Alberts demonstrates so admirably in this important work. Both are imbricated in cultural history, ideological battles, political debates, theological wranglings, and pressing social issues; their interpretation carries legal and policy implications for both individuals and communities.

Alberts chooses to focus her expertise as a religious studies scholar on the burgeoning, yet much debated, branch of religious education that she has termed "integrative religious education." This refers to the non-religious teaching about religion in schools with religiously mixed classrooms. Europe is her primary research area, with particular attention to the cases of England and Sweden, and additional examples from Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany. This lends both breadth and depth to her analysis, as Europe constitutes a varied and lively forum for debates over religious education, and England and Sweden have a long history of employing approaches that emphasize the teaching of various religions as an obligatory subject in schools. Yet their similarities and differences invite helpful comparison in assessing the merits of this particular model.

The integrative religious education approach in Europe has been shaped by a series of theoretical and methodological debates among a range of stakeholders, whether scholars, educators, religious and political leaders, or parents. Deploying to advantage her comparative and critical skills as scholar of religion, Alberts carefully unpacks the dynamics of each context and elucidates the various positions. The main difference between integrative and separative approaches with regard to teaching about religions in schools in Europe appears to derive from divergent conceptions of education and the task of the school in general. But, as Alberts revealingly demonstrates, when one examines

more closely the arguments tendered by the various groups involved in these debates over the character of religious education than the question of power relations between religions and the state becomes more apparent. Alberts proffers some interesting reflections on which religion-state configurations are likely to be more conducive to favoring the integrative approach. It seems fair to say that religious education, especially non-confessional integrative religious education, appears to excel in bringing out the ideological and political dimensions of education, as well as religion (“church”)-state entanglements.

These issues of secularity, plurality, religious heritage, and interculturalism will clearly resonate with American readers—whether specialists in the field of religious education or not. If they are involved with school education then they may be inspired by some of the courageous efforts of academics, teachers, religious leaders, and policy-makers in various European contexts to develop educational policy and content more in keeping with the times. There are initiatives in California,<sup>1</sup> Iowa,<sup>2</sup> and Massachusetts,<sup>3</sup> for example, to develop curricular materials from a non-confessional, comparative religious perspective. Some schools allow teaching about religion and religions within the context of other courses, such as history and social studies, and there are wider efforts to promote this as good education—especially post 9/11.<sup>4</sup> But these are still a drop in the ocean; university students arrive in our classes with virtually no knowledge of the world’s religions, and little understanding of how religion operates in the lives of individuals, communities or nations. In contrast to fears in some European quarters about disestablishmentarianism or loss of religious privilege, in the U.S. context it is rather the specter of establishmentarianism that looms large. Furthermore, debates over whether and what to teach about

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- 1 See, e.g., the Religion and Public Education Resource Center (RPERC) “<http://www.csuchico.edu/rs/rperc/>” (accessed September 11, 2007) and Religious Studies in Secondary Schools <http://www.rsiss.net/> (accessed September 11, 2007).
  - 2 The University of Northern Iowa publishes the journal *Religion and Education* “<http://www.uni.edu/coe/jrae/index.htm>” (accessed September 11, 2007).
  - 3 Program in Religion and Secondary Education at Harvard Divinity School <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/prse/hstars> (accessed September 11, 2007).
  - 4 See Council on Islamic Education/First Amendment Center (2000) *Teaching About Religion in National and State Social Standards* “<http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp?documentID=3976>” (accessed September 11, 2007).

religion in U.S. schools tend to get sidelined by law suits over school prayer, vouchers, student religious groups, and creationism.<sup>5</sup>

Little wonder that Kwame Anthony Appiah in his recent book on *The Ethics of Identity* claims that:

The greatest controversies about education in democracies, as we know, tend to occur when people feel that their own children are being taught things that are inconsistent with claims that are crucial marks of their own collective identities.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the present book, Alberts has been concerned to link her careful exposition of theory and methodology pertaining to the academic study of and teaching about religious diversity to discussions of relevant educational theory and philosophy. It is in the last part of the book that she really comes to the fore with not only her critique of misguided policy and approaches, but with her advocacy of what an educationally sound integrative religious education should look like. She sensitively addresses the ambivalences but also underscores the vital importance of moving forward with a more inclusive and less discriminatory model of religious education. Her ideal curriculum would include not just religious traditions but also worldviews and ideologies, in a discrete subject. As she rightly argues, these educational options have implications for questions of citizenship, minority rights, religious pluralism, and intercultural coexistence. She is in good company. The former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Professor Abdelfattah Amor, placed considerable emphasis on school education because of its power to influence the protection of the precarious right to freedom of religion and belief and to promote tolerance and understanding.<sup>7</sup>

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5 See the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Religion & Public Schools," 2007 "<http://pewforum.org/religion-schools/>" (accessed September 10, 2007).

See also the People for the American Way, "Teaching Religion in Public Schools" "<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=2462>" (accessed September 11, 2007) and Charles Haynes (First Amendment Center), "Religious Liberty in Public Schools" "[http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel\\_liberty/publicschools/topic\\_faqs.aspx?topic=teaching\\_about\\_religion](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic_faqs.aspx?topic=teaching_about_religion)" (accessed September 11, 2007). See also Thomas, R. Murray. 2006. *Religion in Schools: Controversies around the World*. Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 135-150.

6 Appiah, Kwame A. 2005. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 208.

7 The Oslo Coalition project on School Education, Tolerance, and Freedom of Religion or Belief was formed in 2001 to this end "[http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/project\\_school\\_education/index.html](http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/project_school_education/index.html)" (accessed September 10, 2007).

If one thought for a moment that the field of religious education was not rich terrain for a contemporary scholar of religion to investigate, Wanda Alberts' work proves otherwise. Similarly, if one imagined that religious education, particularly integrative religious education, could make headway without the insights that religion scholars have with regard to interpretation, authority, representation, and plurality, then Alberts' work again proves otherwise. Despite the author's expressed concerns about the resistance of conservative religious forces and the challenge of increasingly centralized and standardized education practices, she is not without optimism. She looks forward to increased momentum for integrative religious education at the European level and the possibility of reviving the more progressive, emancipatory dimension of religious education.<sup>8</sup>

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8 See, in this regard, Robert Jackson's upbeat editorial for the *British Journal of Religious Education* 29,3 (2007): 213-215.

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## Acknowledgements

“There must be an alternative to separating children by confession when it comes to teaching and learning about religions in schools.” These were my thoughts when I studied German accounts of school religious education in the face of increasing plurality and globalisation. In Germany, because of the dominant separative-confessional model, integrative RE is still somewhat of a taboo topic. Therefore, I sometimes have to think twice, even at social events, when people ask me about my work, before I start to talk about it, as there is always the risk of provoking a heated controversy. In England or Sweden, however, people find it difficult to believe that we really have this separative approach in Germany. It took a while before I was able to break away from my situatedness in the German context, in which one always has to excuse oneself for deviating from the dominant model, and dared to come forward with and stand by my own position about the appropriate educational response to recent challenges for religious education.

Without any doubt, my concept will not be without inconsistencies. However, in the young field of integrative religious education, where we are still debating very basic questions such as the general character of the subject, it is necessary for us to actually begin to develop concepts from a study-of-religions point of view. It may take some time until the basic issues concerning integrative RE, as seen from a study-of-religions perspective, are settled and generally accepted models are developed. However, I regard being part of this current liminal phase of RE politics as an exciting challenge and look forward to being involved in further developing models and methods for integrative RE, together with my colleagues from Northern Europe and elsewhere, whose work and friendship I appreciate very much.

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# Introduction

## Integrative religious education

In this thesis the term “integrative religious education” is used as an analytical category referring to a particular form of school religious education in which the children of a class are not separated – as opposed to separative confessional approaches – but learn together about different religions. “Integrative” refers to two distinctive aspects of this kind of religious education (RE): (1) the non-separative educational framework, which takes religious plurality – in schools and society in general – as its starting point and which requires a concept for dealing with diversity in the classroom, in particular with respect to teaching about different religions, and (2) making various religions the subject matter without taking the perspective of any of these religions as an overall framework.<sup>1</sup> Thus, “integrative RE” means non-separative and non-confessional school education about different religions.

In different countries and languages various terms have been used to describe this kind of RE. In Germany, for example, “interreligiöser Religionsunterricht” (interreligious RE), “Religionsunterricht für alle” (RE for all), “allgemeiner Religionsunterricht” (general RE) and “Religionskunde” (knowledge about religion) have been suggested.<sup>2</sup> The latter is also used in Sweden, where this school subject is called “religionskunskap”. Unlike “interreligious RE”, which implies a religious encounter, “multifaith RE”, which is widely used in English, encapsulates the character of the subject quite well. However, I prefer to use “integrative RE” in the above sense in order not to emphasise any as-

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1 “Integrative” should not be misunderstood as describing an attempt to integrate the positions of the different religions into a coherent whole.

2 “Interreligiöser Religionsunterricht” and “Religionsunterricht für alle” have been used, for example, for the Hamburg model, cf. chapter IV, section 2.2.2. “Allgemeiner Religionsunterricht” was used for example by Gert Otto, who later preferred “Religionskunde”, as it is less ambiguous than the former (see Otto 1992: Allgemeiner Religionsunterricht – Religionsunterricht für alle). “Religionskunde” is also used in the new school subject “Lebensgestaltung – Ethik – Religionskunde” (ways of life – ethics – knowledge about religion), which was introduced in the state of Brandenburg in the 1990s, see chapter IV, section 2.2.2.

pect of religion, for example faith, in the name of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Some European countries, particularly in northern Europe, have integrative RE as an individual school subject.<sup>4</sup> Sweden and England have had the longest traditions of integrative RE as an individual compulsory subject for all pupils from primary up to secondary levels.

## The academic study of religions and RE

If integrative RE is to be educational and not religious in itself, the academic disciplines of the study of religions and education ought to be responsible for the design of programmes for this school subject. The reason for this is that – unlike theologies, which study one or more religions within a religious framework<sup>5</sup> – the academic discipline of the study of religions deals with religious diversity from a non-religious perspective and has, therefore, sought to develop a methodology for an impartial approach to different religions.

However, the field of didactics has been neglected in the academic study of religions in many countries for a long time. This is because, until recently, in most countries of the world school curricula did not normally include a study of different religions from an impartial point of view but particular religions were taught from a confessional point of view. In countries with separative confessional school RE, a need for the kind of knowledge that the study of religions can provide was first recognised when so-called alternative subjects, like “ethics”, “philosophy of life” or “values and norms” were introduced for children who did not want to participate in confessional instruction. However, this has still not brought about the development of a coherent didactics of the study of religions. This may be demonstrated using the example of Germany. As most of German RE is confessional, RE in general is re-

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3 I have found one article in German that uses the phrase “integrativer Religionsunterricht”, see Knauth and Weiße 1996: *Lernbereich Religion/Ethik und integrativer Religionsunterricht aus SchülerInnensicht*. Like its English equivalent, this did not use to be a common term for this kind of RE. The formulation “integrative religious education”, which I have used in conference papers since 2003 (cf., e.g., Alberts 2005: *European models of integrative religious education*), has been taken up by some other scholars, for example Pye and Franke (2004: *The study of religions and its contribution to problem-solving in a plural world*, 14), or Thomassen (2005: *RE in a pluralistic society: experiences from Norway*, 241).

4 For integrative RE in the European context see chapter IV.2.

5 It is often overlooked in the debates about integrative RE that this also holds for universal theologies. Unlike the study of religions, pluralist theologies of religions are still normative, seeking to make sense of religious diversity.

garded as a matter of individual religious traditions and theologies rather than of the study of religions. Recently, more and more theologians have started to reflect upon how learning about different religions may be included in confessional RE.<sup>6</sup> However, this kind of reflection must not be mistaken for a didactics of the study of religions, as these approaches still operate in a general theological – and not impartial – framework.<sup>7</sup> Apart from a few exceptions, for example, Peter Antes or Udo Tworuschka,<sup>8</sup> most German scholars of religions have shown little if any interest in school RE until very recently. This also involves a lack of research from a study-of-religions point of view about existent concepts for teaching different religions in RE.<sup>9</sup> The situation is better in countries with a longer and wider tradition in integrative RE. However, even in those countries the distinction between the different functions of the study of religions and various theologies with respect to RE is not always clearly made and responsibilities are sometimes confused.<sup>10</sup>

On an international level, RE is again mostly conceived of as separate confessional instruction in a particular religion. Therefore, only a few scholars of religions have taken an interest in RE, but this field has rather been regarded as an area of interest for theologians. The fact that integrative RE, which directly relates to the study of religions, may actually be an alternative or a complement to common practice of RE in many countries in order to enhance knowledge about different relig-

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6 See for example Lähnemann 1998: *Evangelische Religionspädagogik in interreligiöser Perspektive*, Meyer 1998: *Zeugnisse fremder Religionen im Unterricht. "Weltreligionen" im deutschen und englischen Religionsunterricht*.

7 Confusion is, for example, caused in the section "Religionen-Didaktik" by Martin Jäggle in Johann Figl's *Handbuch Religionswissenschaft* (2003). Contrary to what one may expect from a compendium in the study of religions, Jäggle, a Catholic theologian, does not distinguish between teaching different religions in confessional and non-confessional frameworks. Therefore, theological approaches (e.g. by Johannes Lähnemann), designed for confessional RE and therefore frequently operating with a "we" vs. "the other" dichotomy, are presented along with the English *A Gift to the Child* approach, which was particularly designed for an integrative framework.

8 See the diverse publications by Antes and Tworuschka, e.g. Antes 1995: *Religionspädagogik und Religionswissenschaft*, Tworuschka 1982: *Methodische Zugänge zu den Weltreligionen*. Along with several publications about the representation of different religions, Tworuschka has recently also published a CD-ROM for the exploration of different religions (2004: *Religiopolis – Weltreligionen erleben*).

9 For accounts of the scarce coverage of questions of didactics in the study of religions in Germany see Körber 1988: *Didaktik der Religionswissenschaft* (in: *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1) and Fauth 1998: *Zur Didaktik der Religionswissenschaft*. Cf. also Bauer 1996: *Zwischen Religionenkunde und erfahrungsorientiertem Unterricht*, 155ff.

10 See my criticism of some English approaches, e.g. sections 2.3 and 2.9 in chapter II, or of the Norwegian approach (chapter IV, section 2.2.1).

ions, which is more and more acknowledged as an important element of education, has only recently attracted the interest of more scholars in the study of religions. Above all, scholars from countries which already have integrative approaches have been working for an internationalisation of the debate. Apart from the early ground-breaking work by Ninian Smart,<sup>11</sup> recently the work of the Danish scholar Tim Jensen, who has for years been engaged in promoting a study-of-religions approach to school RE on a European level,<sup>12</sup> or the contributions by the English scholar Robert Jackson, who has developed a consistent study-of-religions approach to teaching different religions in integrative RE and established an international network of scholars who use similar methods,<sup>13</sup> are particularly important in this respect, but there are also a number of other valuable contributions.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the participation of scholars of religions in the creation or revision of syllabuses for integrative RE, and exchange beyond national levels about these procedures, are important for the development of sound concepts for integrative RE.<sup>15</sup>

However, as the panel sessions on RE at the world congress of the *International Association for the History of Religions* (IAHR) in Tokyo in 2005 have shown, there is still anything but a consensus about a study-of-religions approach to integrative RE. While some papers clearly emphasised the possibilities and limits of a sound study-of-religions position, others did not as clearly distinguish between theological and study-of-religions positions, leaving confusion rather than clarification about the general role of the study of religions with respect to RE. However, the fact that questions about RE were discussed in several

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- 11 For the work of Ninian Smart see chapter II, section 1.1.2 and cf., for example, Smart 1968: *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*.
  - 12 For the work of Jensen see chapter IV, section 2.1.2 and cf., e.g., Jensen 2002: RE in public schools – a must for a secular state. Jensen is also one of the few scholars of religions who take an interest in the increasingly international debate about models of RE in Europe.
  - 13 For the work of Jackson see chapter II section 2.4. and chapter IV, section 2.2.1 and cf., for example, Jackson 1997: *RE. An Interpretive Approach* and 2004: *Rethinking RE and Plurality*.
  - 14 See, for example, the work of Nils G. Holm, e.g. Holm (ed.) 2000: *Islam and Christianity in School Religious Education* or Holm (ed.) 1997: *The Familiar and the Unfamiliar in the World Religions: Challenges for Religious Education Today*. Cf. also the European research project on Islam in textbooks, see Falaturi and Tworuschka 1992: *A guide to the presentation of Islam in school textbooks*, and the recent study on Christianity, Islam and Judaism in European curricula by Kaul-Seidmann, Nielssen et al. (2003: *European Identity and Cultural Pluralism*).
  - 15 Here I refer, for example, to the work of the Norwegian scholar Einar Thomassen in the committee that revised the syllabus for Norwegian integrative RE, cf. Thomassen 2005: *Religious education in a pluralistic society: experiences from Norway*.

panel sessions at all reflects the general trend that education, and school RE in particular, are increasingly claiming their place on the agendas of departments for the study of religions in many regions of the world.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, beyond the important work of a few individual scholars,<sup>17</sup> the development of a coherent school didactics of the study of religions, which includes recent considerations within this academic discipline as well as within education, is still in its infancy. For example, a comparative analysis and criticism of concepts for integrative RE in different countries from a study-of-religions perspective still remains a desideratum, as does the development of a clear study-of-religions position about the general character and individual features of integrative RE.

### Aims, contents and limitations of this study

This study aims at contributing to the development of a school didactics of the study of religions. It provides an analysis of a number of existent academic concepts for integrative RE from a study-of-religions perspective. The main focus of my analysis will be on concepts for integrative RE in England and Sweden (chapters II, III, and IV.1), while the general situation of integrative RE in Europe will also be taken into account and further examples from other countries will be discussed (chapter IV.2). The criteria for my analysis build on my conclusions about the debates on theory and methodology in the academic disciplines which I regard as responsible for integrative RE. My approach to these debates in the study of religions and education as well as my conclusions about the character of these disciplines will be outlined in chapter I. These theoretical and methodological considerations, together with the results from the analyses of different approaches to integrative RE in Europe, form the basis for the framework for integrative RE which I suggest in the final part of this study (chapter IV.3).

Sweden and England have been selected for their long and extensive traditions in integrative RE. The situation of integrative RE in Norway is briefly discussed in chapter IV, section 2.2.1, as an example

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16 The regional conference of the IAHR in Yogyakarta and Semarang on Java with the theme "Religious Harmony. Problems, Practice and Education" (cf. Pye, Franke et al., ed., 2006: Religious Harmony) also reflected this trend. At this conference a clear study-of-religions approach to RE was put forward in the panel on "RE in global perspective". The conference of the *European Association for the Study of Religions* (EASR) in Bremen in 2007 also had education as one of its conference themes.

17 Such as Ninian Smart, Robert Jackson or Tim Jensen, as mentioned above.

of recent developments in the European landscape of RE. Without any doubt, an in-depth study of other models of integrative RE, for example, in Denmark or Estonia,<sup>18</sup> would have contributed to the completion of the picture. However, there is a limit to what can be done in an individual study. Furthermore, the issues that have arisen in the study of integrative RE in Sweden, England and Norway, as well as of other models for teaching about different religions in Germany and the Netherlands (chapter IV, sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) are indicative of the kinds of debates about RE in other countries as well, for example with respect to policies towards religious plurality, responsibility for RE in state schools or the general character of integrative or separative RE.

The main focus of my analysis of current English and Swedish approaches to integrative RE is on academic concepts for this subject that have been published by scholars of RE. These concepts are analysed with respect to the following aspects: aims and contents of integrative RE, the underlying concept of religion, the representation of religions and the notion of education. The historical and social contexts in which these concepts have been developed, including, for example, changing legal requirements, national guidelines or institutional responsibilities, are also considered.

This is a theoretical study based on the study of different kinds of written sources, for example, official documents, academic literature, teachers' manuals and textbooks for RE, which I collected during my research in England and Sweden between 2002 and 2005, and not an empirical study of actual classroom practice of integrative RE, even though visits to schools and teacher training institutions have complemented my study of the textual sources.

The framework for integrative RE which I suggest in the final part of this study (chapter IV.3) has been designed for the European situation in particular, but may also be transferred to other regions, possibly with some modifications that other contexts make necessary, however without changing its general character.

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18 For Denmark cf. the publications by Jensen, e.g. 2005: European and Danish RE, or Buchard 2004: RE in the school: approaches in school practice and research in Denmark. For Estonia cf. Schreiner 2005: RE in Europe and the information on Estonia on the website of the European Forum for Teachers in RE, see EFTRE 2005: Estonia.

## A note on citations and translations

References to literature that is quoted or mentioned in the text are given in the footnotes, citing the last name of the author(s), the year of publication and a short title, which may correspond with the original title but may also be an abbreviated version, for example without subtitle or with "RE" as an abbreviation for religious education. Citations may vary slightly if the author is not a person but an institution. Italics in quotations are original, unless stated otherwise. Translations from the German and Swedish are my own.

# Chapter I

## Theory and methodology in the academic disciplines relevant to integrative RE

### 1 The Study of Religions

This chapter is an introduction to the academic study of religions as the discipline which is most closely related to integrative RE as a school subject. As many theoretical and methodological questions which have been discussed at length in the study of religions are also relevant for RE – and have frequently been discussed with respect to RE without reference to the corresponding debates in the study of religions – these issues will briefly be introduced in this chapter in order to provide a study-of-religions background for the development of theory and methodology for integrative RE. Needless to say, there is no one-to-one correspondence between method and theory in the academic and in the school subject. A careful evaluation of those aspects of the academic subject that can be transferred to the school subject, and of the question as to how this is possible is the delicate task for the development of a didactic framework for integrative RE, which is still in its infancy in many countries, including Germany. However, it is important to draw on insights in the study of religions in order not to blindly reproduce the debates on issues which have long been settled on other levels, but to initiate a cross-fertilisation of ideas with respect to similar questions.

This chapter starts by generally introducing the study of religions, with reference to implications from its history as well as to recent developments, and as distinct from other disciplines which are concerned with religion(s), above all theology and philosophy (1.1). It then goes on to look more closely at the subject matter of the study of religions. Different concepts of religion will be briefly assessed, followed by conclusions about the delineation of the subject matter (1.2). The third section of this chapter deals with questions of methodology, in particular with methodological variety and integration in the study of religions as well as with selected issues concerning the representation of religions from a study-of-religions point of view (1.3).

## 1.1 The character of the subject

In the context of this study, an outline of the general character of the study of religions is helpful, particularly since it is frequently confused with dialogical theologies and theologies or philosophies of religion. This section will discuss the distinctive features of the study of religions as the academic discipline which deals with the variety of religions explicitly not from a normative point of view. For this purpose, after an outline of the general character of the academic study of religions (1.1.1), insights and implications from its history will be mapped out (1.1.2), before some recent developments within this discipline are mentioned (1.2.3). The section concludes with some considerations about the limitations of the academic study of religions, which result from its self-set secular and scientific framework (1.2.4).

### 1.1.1 The general character of the academic study of religions

The academic study of religions is a historical, empirical and comparative discipline which deals with the different religious traditions of the world. As distinct from any theology it is a secular discipline which does not make judgements about religious truth claims. Neither does it construe any meaning behind the variety of religions. As a branch of the social and cultural sciences, it is methodologically agnostic with respect to religious claims which are not empirically verifiable. Its interest is in the study, analysis and description of religions as anthropological phenomena, using a methodology which does not prefer any religion over another.<sup>1</sup>

The study of religions exists worldwide and there is a variety of national, regional and international organisations. There is no consensus about the name of the subject. The German term *Religionswissenschaft*, which is rather uncontroversial<sup>2</sup>, has been designated in English in

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1 The following titles may serve as examples of outlines of the general character of the study of religions to which the characterisation in this section owes a great deal: Flasche 2000: *Von der Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbegründung der Religionswissenschaft*, Pye 1999: *Methodological integration in the study of religions*, Pye/Franke 2004: *The Study of Religions and its contribution to problem-solving in a plural world*, Stolz 1997: *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, Waardenburg 1986: *Religionen und Religion. Systematische Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*.

2 Apart from Rainer Flasche's suggestion to call the subject *Religionenwissenschaft* in order to include the plurality of religions in the name, cf. Flasche 2000: *Von der Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbegründung der Religionswissenschaft*. Another point, which has been discussed in a number of countries, is the question of whether

various ways. Clearly, *Theology* or *Divinity*, which are often still the names of faculties which also include *The Study of Religions* are misleading names for the subject as they explicitly point at a theological character of the enterprise. *Religious Studies*, frequently used in Great Britain, may also be misleading as it implies a religious character. *The Study of Religion* or the *Science of Religion* are acceptable names for the subject. They do, however, refer to religion in the singular and the latter might also imply proximity to the sciences as opposed to the humanities. Therefore, in my view, the best solution is to call the subject *The Study of Religions*,<sup>3</sup> because it does not confine it to any individual aspect, such as the comparative aspect in *Comparative Religion*, or the historical aspect in *History of Religions*, and includes the plurality of religions.<sup>4</sup>

Two complementary branches of the study of religions can be identified, a historical descriptive and a theoretical and comparative branch.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, the historical-descriptive branch is concerned with the history, development and contemporary situation of individual religions or religious phenomena. For instance, the development and expansion of different Buddhist traditions from their origins up to the present day is a classical topic of this branch. The theoretical, comparative and systematic<sup>6</sup> branch develops theories on the basis of a comparative study of religions and religious phenomena from the whole range of religions. As it is de facto only possible to compare

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the name of the subject should emphasise the historical aspect of the discipline. In Germany the names *Religionswissenschaft* (the study of religions) and *Religionsgeschichte* (the history of religions) are often used interchangeably. In order to overcome the emphasis on the historical aspect, the German Association for the History of Religions (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte*, DVRG) changed its name to German Association for the Study of Religions (*Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft*, DVRW) in 2005. Other national and international associations have kept the emphasis on history, for example, the *Danish Association for the History of Religions* (DAHR) or the *International Association for the History of Religions* (IAHR).

- 3 The plural in the title seems more felicitous in English than in German.
- 4 This is, for example, the solution of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) or the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR).
- 5 An early convincing description of the distinction between those two branches can be found in Wach 1924: *Religionswissenschaft. Prolegomena zu ihrer wissenschaftstheoretischen Grundlegung*, 21, where he uses the word "längsschnittmäßig" for the historical and the word "querschnittmäßig" for the systematic branch.
- 6 Note that systematic is used here in a way which is different from frequent use in English RE, where the distinction between systematic and thematic refers to different approaches to RE: in the former ("systematic" or "systems-" approach) religions are discussed individually, one after the other, and in the latter ("thematic" approach) phenomena that occur in different religions are discussed comparatively. I find this systematic - thematic distinction in English RE somewhat misleading as it is inconsistent with the common understanding of "systematic", especially in *the study of religions*.

some religions in some respects at a time,<sup>7</sup> general theories about religions, which claim validity also beyond the direct focus of a study have to be based on further empirical evidence and have to be modified if any contradictory evidence is found. Therefore, taking account of mistakes that have been made in the history of the subject, a certain amount of caution is advised when it comes to general theories or statements. The subject matter or "field" with all its phenomena worldwide is so diverse that general statements are almost impossible, since nobody could ever have enough knowledge to verify such a statement in every tradition. This becomes evident also in the difficulties that scholars of religions have in defining "religion" itself (see section 1.2). In order to preserve the scientific character of the subject it is important to clearly define the field for which a theory was developed. In fact, general theories do not really seem to be necessary in the study of religions. A consensus has emerged among many scholars of religions that an analysis and description of structural similarities or "family resemblances"<sup>8</sup> of aspects of religions is a more adequate methodology in the comparative study of religions. To dispense with general theories and formulate theories of limited range seems to be more academically sound in such a complex and disparate field.

Classical comparative studies – for example of rituals, special texts, postulated superhuman beings<sup>9</sup> – have also been criticised for their disregard of dynamics or the respective contexts or intentions behind phenomena that seem superficially similar (see section 1.1.2). These criticisms, which are in fact often justified, point at shortcomings in the way those comparisons were carried out. They do not, however, call comparative methodology as such into question, as a comparative study of dynamics, contexts and intentions is also possible.<sup>10</sup> Generally,

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7 Cf. Pye 1972: *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials*, 22.

8 "Family resemblances" is a term that Wittgenstein introduced. For a reception of this term in the study of religions cf., e.g., Kippenberg 1983: *Diskursive Religionswissenschaft*, 11; Pye 1994: *Religion. Shape and shadow*, Pye 2000: *Westernism unmasked*, Wiebe 2000: *Problems with the family resemblance approach to conceptualizing religion*.

9 The frequently used phrase "culturally postulated superhuman agents" was coined by Milford E. Spiro, see Spiro 1966: *Religion: problems of definition and explanation*, 96.

10 Cf., e.g., Michael Pye's ideas about a comparative study of religious innovation, see, e.g., Pye 1969: *The transplantation of religions*, 1991: *Reflections on the treatment of tradition in comparative perspective*, 109.

in comparative studies equal attention should be paid to similarities and differences.<sup>11</sup>

The study of religions analyses and describes religious phenomena from an academic meta-level, which is independent from the insider perspective, even though the latter is an important voice to be included in any study (see section 1.3 on methodology). This standpoint of independent reflection does not claim to be superior to any religious truth, but presents a scientific approach to religions, which – by definition – must not make any religious truth claim itself. One of the important tasks of the study of religions is the development of concepts that can be used for different religions without being caught in the mindset of one tradition (see section 1.3.3).

As the study of religions restricts itself to the study of those aspects of religions which can be studied scientifically, it has to restrict its field to what can be studied using scientific methods. Religion is regarded as a human phenomenon. Therefore, the study of religions approaches its material with a limited set of specific questions. It is a study of religions “from the outside” as opposed to the theological endeavour of studying one or more religions “from the inside”. The methodology has to be comprehensible (“nachvollziehbar”)<sup>12</sup> for other scholars. It is grounded in empirical evidence, not in philosophical or theological speculations. The study of religions is a discipline, i.e. a methodically ordered approach to the study of a field. It cannot be integrated into any other discipline.<sup>13</sup>

The most common misunderstanding of the study of religions is mistaking it for a kind of universal theology which includes theological reflection about religious diversity. This may be due to the dominance of theologians in public discourse on religions which can in many countries be regarded as a result of the residual power of institutional-

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11 Thus, we could speak of the “comparative and contrastive” study of religions, cf. Pye 1972: 24; cf. also Segal 2001: In defence of the comparative method; Martin 2000: Comparison; Paden 2004: Comparison in the study of religion.

12 This German concept, which means something like “comprehensible”, in this context particularly to people who have access to the same kind of material or on material which was collected and made available by other scholars, seems to be particularly helpful in describing the requirements of the research process, see also Pye 2000: Westernism unmasked, 218.

13 Cf. Pye 1999: Methodological integration in the study of religions, 189, where he shows that the study of religions can neither be integrated in history, as the methods of historians do not normally involve field-work, nor in sociology, as there is more to religions than just their social aspects. See also Pye 1982: The Study of Religion as an autonomous discipline.

ised religion.<sup>14</sup> It seems to be difficult to communicate the basic distinctions between religious (universalist theologies), secular (the study of religions) and secularist (comprehensive secular explanations of religions) approaches to religions beyond – and even within – academia. This is one of the reasons why the role of the study of religions as the academic partner for integrative RE has not yet been fully acknowledged.

Michael Pye draws attention to some other important factors that contribute to misunderstandings about the general character of the study of religions: first, the interdisciplinary character of the subject creates a situation in which people who come from other disciplines, for example, anthropology, often do not “go to the trouble of acquiring a methodological orientation in the discipline of the study of religions”.<sup>15</sup> Second, different emphases in the study of religions – such as phenomenology of religion, anthropology of religion or psychology of religion – have resulted in some kind of compartmentalisation which is detrimental, because “if the field is regarded as coherent, then a greater degree of methodological coordination, or even integration, is intellectually desirable and ought therefore to be sought”.<sup>16</sup> Finally, there is serious methodological divergence and sometimes methodological fashions are for a short period of time regarded as *the* appropriate method, while other important methods are neglected.<sup>17</sup> What I am trying to outline as a contemporary consensus about the general character of the subject – despite its, in many respects, contested nature – is the preliminary result of an ongoing process of continuous reflection and modification of theory and methodology in the worldwide study of religions. In the next section, important aspects of the history of the subject and their implications for its present state will be considered.

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14 Cf., e.g., McCutcheon 2000: Critics not caretakers: the scholar of religion as public intellectual, 170.

15 Pye 1999: Methodological integration in the study of religions, 193.

16 Ibid., 192.

17 Cf. *ibid.*, 193. Pye refers to cognitive science as a fashion in the study of religions, which leads many scholars to neglect the need for fieldwork, textual studies and comparison.

### 1.1.2 Implications from the history of the academic study of religions

A useful distinction between four major phases in the history of the academic study of religions is made by the Danish scholar Armin W. Geertz.<sup>18</sup> He regards the second half of the 19th century as the formative or “classical” period (phase 1) in which the differences between the study of religions and theology were formulated. The first 60 years of the 20th century may be called the adolescent or “modern” period (phase 2), in which the differences between the study of religions and basically everything else were formulated and an attempt was made to provide the study of religions with a positivist, empiricist and historicist foundation. Geertz calls the years between 1970 and 1990 the rebellious early adult period (phase 3) which, according to him, represents the critical turn in the study of religions and in which everything was subjected to doubt except the premises of the doubters. In the current phase (phase 4), which Geertz calls “the-approaching-the-maturity-of-harried-parents phase”, hard decisions at the cost of ideals have to be made in order to get on with one’s life. Geertz’s somewhat humorous account of the history of the subject in analogy to developmental stages of human beings does in fact address the important phases and turning points which are all still relevant for the present state of the study of religions. I am going to demonstrate this with a spotlight discussion of selected issues from those phases and their implications for today.<sup>19</sup>

In the first phase (second half of the 19th century) the work of F. Max Müller is one important starting point for the emergence of the study of religions as an independent discipline. Many of the issues that became central questions in the study of religions later were already addressed by Müller. The editor of the *Sacred Books of the East*, who saw close resemblances between religions and languages, regarded a study of different religions as a necessary prerequisite for an approach to the phenomenon “religion” in general. He coined the famous phrase about religions, which has been cited numerous in the history of the study of religions since then: “He who knows one knows none.”<sup>20</sup> Müller distinguished between a historical study of religions, which deals with the historical phenomena of religion and a theoretical one, which stud-

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18 Cf. Geertz: 2004: Definition, categorization and indecision: or, how to get on with the Study of Religion, 109f.

19 For a detailed account of phases 1 and 2 cf. also Sharpe: Comparative Religion. A History.

20 Müller 1876: Einleitung in die vergleichende Religionswissenschaft, 14.

ies the conditions that make religion possible.<sup>21</sup> His attachment to traditions that were fashionable at the time when he wrote – for example his belief that all of humankind unconsciously progresses towards Christianity, which has a special position among the religions of the world<sup>22</sup> – does not belittle his merit for the academic study of religions as a discipline independent from theology.

Another development with important impulses for the emerging identity of the subject took place in the late 19th century Netherlands, where the history of religions was introduced very early as an academic discipline. In the work of Cornelius Petrus Tiele, who was Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion in Leiden, we can again find a number of ideas about the character of the subject, that were to be discussed intensively later. In his *Inleiding tot de godsdienstwetenschap* (1898), for example, he distinguishes between the general history of religions and the study of religions which builds on the results of the general history of religions in that it answers the question of what the nature of religion is, which reveals itself in all the different phenomena.<sup>23</sup> His methodology is an early version of “the phenomenological method”, which was used widely in the next phase of the history of the study of religions: “We study these phenomena [religious ideas and actions] in order to deduce what is concealed behind the phenomena.”<sup>24</sup> The discrepancy between the proclaimed methodological presuppositions for the study of religions as a discipline and the methodology actually used in one’s own work is also similar in the work of Tiele and the later phenomenologists. On the one hand, Tiele writes that “[t]he subject matter of our discipline is not the superhuman itself, but religion which is based on the belief in the superhuman. And to study this religion as a historical-psychological and at the same time social, i.e. purely human phenomenon, is definitely a task of science.”<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Tiele presupposes a unity within the diversity of religions and thereby leaves the methodological framework which he himself introduced, as he structures his study from a particular meta-physical/theological perspective.<sup>26</sup>

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21 Cf. *ibid.*, 19. Müller uses the terms “historische Theologie” and “theoretische Theologie”.

22 Cf. Müller 1979: *Essays*, XVIII f.

23 Cf. Tiele 1899: *Einleitung in die Religionswissenschaft* (German edition of the Dutch original from 1898), 11.

24 *Ibid.*, 35.

25 *Ibid.*, 4.

26 Cf. for example *ibid.*, 257.

Two characteristic trends in the second phase (the first 60 years of the 20th century) are substantialist and functionalist definitions of religions and their implications for an understanding of the character of the study of religions. The phenomenologists of religion had a substantialist understanding of religion as a response to revelation. They did not differentiate between a religious and a secular study of religions. Most of them were Christian theologians<sup>27</sup> and understood the study of religions as a kind of universal theology<sup>28</sup> which includes reflection about the variety of religions. They coined, however, terms and concepts which have played an important role in the study of religions until today.

Söderblom regarded people as religious if something is holy to them.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Otto regarded the "numinous"<sup>30</sup>, which is accessible through experience, as the common aspect of all religion. His conclusion for the study of religions was that without any own experience of the numinous it is impossible to understand religious people and, therefore, to be a scholar of religion. Otto's conception of the holy as consisting in the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* can also be found in Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938). "Power" is the important concept in van der Leeuw's understanding of religion. He interprets the phenomenology of religion as a study of the ways that human beings respond to this divine power, i.e. mainly with fear and fascination.<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Heiler also demands that the scholar of religions approaches religion like a sanctuary with "the original religious emotions of reverent shyness and admiration".<sup>32</sup> For him, the study of religions is concerned with "religion as such".<sup>33</sup> The phenomenal world originates from the divine. The phenomena are interesting only insofar as they are approaches to the

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27 Nathan Söderblom, for example, was Bishop in the Church of Sweden, Rudolf Otto was Professor of Systematic Theology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Marburg, Friedrich Heiler was also for some time professor in this faculty.

28 Söderblom wanted to prove the existence of God from the history of religions, Otto intended to create a covenant of religious people (*religiöser Menschheitsbund*) and Heiler extended his efforts for a reunification of the major Christian churches (cf. his ideas about "protestant Catholicism" [*evangelische Katholizität*] and his participation as a Catholic in the Protestant Lord's Supper together with Söderblom) to include an attempt to unify the variety of religions with the help of the study of religions.

29 Cf. Söderblom 1913: Holiness, 731.

30 A word he invented to denote the holy minus its moral and rational aspects. Cf. Otto 1969: *The Idea of the Holy* [German original 1917], 6.

31 v.d. Leeuw 1956: *Phänomenologie der Religion* [1933], 33.

32 Heiler 1920: *Das Gebet* [1918]: VIII, similarly in 1959: *Die Religionen der Menschheit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*: 48.

33 Heiler 1920: *Das Gebet* [1918]: 17.

divine. The scholar of religions has to become immersed in the atmosphere of the holy in order to approach the heart of religious experience.<sup>34</sup> Heiler does not really see a difference between theology and the study of religions, because in his view the latter is likewise concerned with an experience of transcendent realities.<sup>35</sup>

From the point of view of the phenomenologists, religion is a phenomenon *sui generis*, which is given *a priori*. This is also evident in the work of Mircea Eliade, whose approach is somewhat different from the others, despite similar presuppositions and results. In contrast to the other mentioned phenomenologists, Eliade was not a theologian. His ideas are more independent from a Christian interpretation of the variety of religions. His work in the study of religions as well as in his fiction<sup>36</sup> is concerned with hierophanies, which he regards as the subject matter of the study of religions. At the heart of his philosophical construction is the assumption of an essential unity of religion and the holy, which can be studied in these various hierophanies, i.e. manifestations of the holy in space and time. Eliade describes the holy as qualitatively different from the profane, an eternal substance and ultimate reality opposed to the illusion of historical existence.<sup>37</sup>

In the course of the 20th century it became evident that this "classical" version of phenomenology of religion is religious in itself. It presupposed a unity of religion(s) as a starting point for comparisons. The assumption that it is possible to access the essence of religion by a study of the variety of phenomena is a philosophical construct which cannot be a premise of the study of religions if the latter is regarded as a discipline of the empirical social and cultural sciences and not of normative or speculative theology or philosophy. The phenomenologists of religion formulated a number of helpful methodological presuppositions for the study of religions, which helped to shape the character of the subject and to lay its academic foundations. Interestingly though, their own work was often inconsistent with those premises. The most illustrative example is perhaps the concept of intellectual

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34 See Heiler 1961: *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, 14-17, where Heiler describes his understanding of scientific and religious prerequisites a scholar needs in the study of religions.

35 Heiler's famous phrase about the relationship between the study of religions and theology is: "Alle Religionswissenschaft ist letztlich *Theologie*, insofern sie es nicht nur mit psychologischen und geschichtlichen Erscheinungen, sondern mit dem Erlebnis jenseitiger Realitäten zu tun hat." (1961: *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, 17).

36 Eliade also produced a remarkable literary work.

37 Cf. Eliade 1954: *Die Religionen und das Heilige*: e.g. 12f, 56, 519; see also 1957: *Das Heilige und das Profane*.

suspense (*epoché*) or “bracketing”, which can be regarded as an important part of “the phenomenological method”. The idea was that in the study of religions one’s own religious evaluations and convictions ought to be bracketed in order to approach the different religions without prejudice and partiality.<sup>38</sup> It is, however, easy to find examples to the contrary in the works of all the phenomenologists mentioned above.<sup>39</sup> In my view, the concept of “bracketing” is still helpful in order to demonstrate the attempted methodological agnosticism in the methodology of the study of religions, even though it is necessary to complement it with a clear reflection of one’s own situatedness in a certain historical and social context. Influences and ideological presuppositions cannot be ignored or denied, but have to be made explicit if a study is to be academically sound.<sup>40</sup> This is, for example, an important point of postcolonial or feminist criticism of the study of religions, which will be discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, the attempt not to distort the representation of any religion unduly remains an inalienable and extremely important task in the study of religions.

As opposed to phenomenology, functional approaches to religion have often reflected the special interests of individual disciplines which deal with religion among a number of other phenomena or as a part of their actual object of study. Religion has been interpreted as compensation by psychologists like Freud and Jung, as a function of social integration by sociologists like Durkheim and Weber or as a means of catharsis by anthropologists like Malinowski, van Gennep and Turner. These analyses are helpful for an understanding of certain aspects of religions. They are, however, unacceptable as comprehensive explanations of the phenomenon “religion”. There is no denying the fact that fear plays a certain role in many religions, that religions frequently constitute communities and structure contingency. These are, however, only certain aspects of religion(s) and none of them can serve as a com-

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38 See for example the epilegomena of van der Leeuw 1938: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.

39 A number of such examples can be found in the above paragraph.

40 This also includes, for example, a distinction between one’s own religious beliefs and the methodological agnosticism in the methodology of the study of religions. To avoid any misunderstanding let me give an example of what kind of reflection of one’s own situatedness I mean. If for example the belief that there is no truth outside a certain religious group is taken as a starting point for a study of other religions, an impartial approach will not be possible. This presupposition is incompatible with the required methodological agnosticism. If, however, for example the influence of a certain religious and other ideologies on the culture in which one lives, e.g. organisational and economic structures that are taken for granted and recurrent processes of “othering” in societal life, are acknowledged, this may help to make explicit the context in which a certain study is conducted.

prehensively explanatory feature. The different perspectives on the multifaceted and disparate field “religions” have to be integrated into the discipline of the study of religions. The historical, sociological, psychological etc. perspectives are individually insufficient for an adequate study and representation of religions. Despite all interdisciplinarity, methodological integration under the premise of the study of religions is necessary in order to do justice to the breadth of the field and not to allow any individual aspect to be an explanatory feature for the whole phenomenon. This insight is an important result of phase 2. The differences in the understanding of the subject were an important issue at the 10<sup>th</sup> congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in 1960 in Marburg, where the gap, particularly between a universalist theological and an anthropological understanding of the subject, became evident. This gap can be regarded as the reason for the dispute on methods (“Methodenstreit”) which was to follow in the next phase.

Even though Geertz emphasises the general scepticism in phase 3 (1970 to 1990), with an IAHR congress on methodology in Turku in 1973, which resulted in theoretical and methodological confusion, he acknowledges important decisions which were taken in this phase. In Turku, a growing dissatisfaction with Western science was expressed by intellectuals from former colonies. The relevance of research to society was discussed and in the debate about theory “[m]ost of the participants were aware of the fact that there was no meta-theory in the study of religion.”<sup>41</sup> The meeting in Marburg in 1988<sup>42</sup> as well as the Warsaw statement in 1989<sup>43</sup> can be regarded as points of no return. In Warsaw, agreement was achieved on “conceptualizing religion as a historical phenomenon, engaging in empirically-based research, but perhaps more significantly, envisioning the study of religion in terms of the larger (theoretical) project of studying human society and culture.”<sup>44</sup> The two quotations above illustrate that – despite all disagreement and difficulties – the two important issues which were discussed with respect to phase 2 (comprehensive functional explanations and the problems of the classical phenomenology of religion) were taken up and dealt with constructively at an international level in phase 3. The study of religions as an independent discipline – which consists of more than a collection of data from other disciplines – took its place among the social and cultural sciences. Important outcomes of the dis-

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41 Geertz and McCutcheon 2000: The role of method and theory in the IAHR, 18.

42 Cf. Pye (ed.) 1989: Marburg Revisited.

43 See Tyloch 1990: Studies on Religions in the Context of Social Sciences, 8.

44 Geertz and McCutcheon 2000: The role of method and theory in the IAHR, 23f.

pute on methods was that the demand for an adequate, non-reductionist approach, which does justice to the delicate phenomenon "religion(s)" and takes seriously the perspective of believers, was supplemented by the paradigm of intersubjective verifiability on the one hand and by refraining from comprehensive explanations or definitions on the other.<sup>45</sup> Further issues and implications from the history of the study of religions which are relevant for phase 4 (from 1990 up to the present) will be taken up in the next chapter on recent developments.

### 1.1.3 Recent developments in the study of religions

Recent developments in the world-wide study of religions are certainly manifold and cannot be discussed at length here. My focus will be on a few trends that can be observed in a number of countries in Europe as well as in international organisations. Without any doubt, others would mention different developments here.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, increased attention has been paid to phenomena outside institutionalised religion, often as a direct or indirect response to the secularisation theory, which is questionable in many respects. Concepts like invisible religion (Luckmann)<sup>47</sup>, civil religion (Bellah)<sup>48</sup> and implicit religion (Bailey)<sup>49</sup> point at influential aspects of religion beyond institutional organisation. In their study on "Theoretical correlations between worldview, civil religion, institutional religion and informal spiritualities" Helena Helve and Michael Pye present a set of concepts for the study of contemporary religion and conclude that "the trend is for institutional religion to weaken, while at the same time civil religion and informal spiritualities are not weakening. Rather, they are strengthening."<sup>50</sup> The inclusion of a study of worldviews and an increasing scepticism towards the holy-

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45 Cf. Berner 1983: *Gegenstand und Aufgabe der Religionswissenschaft*, 98.

46 A similar perspective is taken by Armin W. Geertz (2000: *Global perspectives on methodology in the study of religions*), who regards the following issues as "post-modern challenges" to the study of religions: orientalism, the construction of the exotic, the representation and misrepresentation of other cultures, the politics of science and feminist criticism.

47 Luckmann 1991: *Die unsichtbare Religion*.

48 See Bellah 1970: *Beyond Belief*, especially pp. 168-189 and Bellah and Hammond 1980: *Varieties of Civil Religion*.

49 See Bailey 1997: *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*; cf. also the journal "Implicit Religion".

50 Helve and Pye 2001/2002: *Theoretical correlations between world-view, civil religion, institutional religion and informal spiritualities*, 101.

profane dichotomy can be observed in several countries, particularly in Scandinavia.<sup>51</sup>

Many of the recent developments are interconnected and influence each other. Internationalisation (especially growing participation of scholars from various countries in international conferences) is directly linked to postcolonial reflection and an awareness of orientalism and occidentalism. In the attempt to avoid discrimination by misrepresentation or negligence the criticism of colonialism and orientalism goes hand in hand with a criticism of androcentrism, which has until recently been another unquestioned paradigm in the study of religions. The change of perspective from a study of ancient texts to a study of contemporary religion(s) involved a change to empirical social research as well as an increasing awareness of the potential social and political relevance of the study of religions and an acknowledgement of the social responsibility of the scholar of religions, for example with respect to criticism of ideologies. In the following, postcolonial reflection, feminist criticism and the debate about social responsibility may serve as an illustration of the type of discussions which are going on in the study of religions at the moment.

### Postcolonial reflection

Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) was a milestone in raising public awareness of the assumed cultural supremacy of the West in its study of other cultures. It disclosed convincingly the distortions in European constructions of other cultures. The relevance of Said's criticism for the study of religions cannot be overrated. Many of Said's points can be regarded as a direct criticism of the study of religions. One famous example of the kind of distortions of Eastern religions in the representations of Western scholars is Western constructions of Hinduism. It can easily be demonstrated that early Western understandings of Hinduism were to a considerable extent constructions based on Western models. A selected set of phenomena, which were assumed to be the important aspects of any religion – for example an-

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51 Cf. for example the importance of the concepts worldview or view of life in the Nordic study of religions, e.g. Helve 1993: *The World View of Young People: A Longitudinal Study of Finnish Youth Living in a Suburb of Metropolitan Helsinki* or Helve 2000: *The formation of gendered world views and gender ideology*; see also Jensen 2002: *From the History of Religions to the Study of Religions. Trends and tendencies in Denmark*. A similar approach can be found in Berner 1983: *Gegenstand und Aufgabe der Religionswissenschaft*, which will be further discussed in chapter 1.2.2.

cient sacred texts in a learned language and a clergy – was taken to be representative of the entire tradition. Thus, the Brahmanic, scriptural and traditional aspects of Hinduism were mistaken for the religion Hinduism as a whole. Recently, there have been a number of attempts – in India itself and in the West<sup>52</sup> – to rewrite the history of Hindu traditions, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of formerly marginalised groups, including above all women and lower-class people, in order to produce a more balanced and realistic account of the complex and multifaceted phenomena which together make up what is called “Hinduism”. Apart from the special emphasis on the former exclusion and misrepresentation of women, the inclusion of popular, folk, non-Sanskritic and regional trends is inalienable in the attempt to appreciate Hinduism in its full diversity. The blatant distortions of the past – including questionable constructions of periphery (e.g. “the East”, women) and centre (e.g. “the West”, men) – are no longer admissible.

In 2001, Morny Joy complained that the implications of postcolonial reflection – in particular reflection on power relations, the discrimination of coloured or indigenous people, women and marginal groups, which has taken place in anthropology, history, literature and some contemporary philosophy – have not yet been adequately considered in the study of religions.<sup>53</sup> She shows repercussions for the study of religions if the charges are taken seriously and hopes that in the study of religions, postcolonial reflection, which is still peripheral, will in the future help to alter the subject considerably in order to free it from its 19th century mindset. Even though the full impact of these criticisms, which without any doubt involves a serious reconsideration of theory and methodology in the study of religions, are perhaps still to be expected, awareness about these matters is continuously increasing. An example of an important contribution to the debate is the book *Religion im Spiegelkabinett* (2003), in which different nuances of orientalism, as well as its equivalent “occidentalism” are discussed.<sup>54</sup>

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52 For a survey of contributions from India cf. Joy 2001: Postcolonial Reflections. See also King 1999: Orientalism and the modern myth of “Hinduism”.

53 Joy 2001: Postcolonial Reflections: 177. For a similar argument see Nye 2000. Cf. also Geertz 2000: Global perspectives on methodology in the study of religions.

54 See Schalk (ed.) 2003: Religion im Spiegelkabinett.

### The gender debate

Feminist criticism – or perhaps more generally: the academic debate about gender – has become increasingly influential in the study of religions, even though, as always when residual privileges are at stake, it is still a long way until the relevant issues obtain due consideration not only by a committed minority. Feminist criticism is directed at both the study of religions as an academic institution in which men are over-represented in many respects<sup>55</sup> and theory, methodology and representation of religions, which are often androcentric in that they exclude, marginalise or misrepresent women. Gender has become an issue to be considered in the study of religions somewhat later than in theology. At the congresses of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) there have been panels on gender from 1980 (Winnipeg) onwards, the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) made “Religion and Gender” the theme of its annual conference in 1989. Ursula King recommends two ways of looking at women and religion: (1) the contribution of women to religion, how they influence and shape religion, and (2) the different and complex ways in which women are influenced and shaped, oppressed and liberated by religion. In a gender-reflected approach to religions a study of the role of women is particularly important, as it has been neglected for such a long time. However, “the topic has to be an integral one, concerned with both women and men, and a study to be undertaken by both sexes jointly.”<sup>56</sup> An important contribution to the debate is the book *Women and Religion*, which Ursula King edited in 1995. An update of the developments and the progress that was made can be found in King and Beattie (2004) and the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005).<sup>57</sup>

Donate Pahnke regards “substantial feminism” as particularly relevant to the study of religion. It deals with the clichés about male and female, rejects the dominant gender stereotypes and questions the categories male and female insofar as it assumes non-existence of innate gender differences until there is evidence to the contrary. Pahnke observes that, in the study of religions and its tradition of androcentric

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55 For example, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987) only 175 out of 1357 contributors are women and among the 142 significant “scholars of religion” there are only four women, two American and two British. Cf. King 1990: 284.

56 King 1990: Religion and gender, 285.

57 For the reception of the gender debate in the study of religions see also Mikaelsson 2004: Gendering the history of religions; Clark 2004: Engendering the study of religion.

research about patriarchal major religions, women appear mostly in their relationships to men or as deviation from the male norm.<sup>58</sup> The task for the study of religions is a comprehensive one:

“Mit der einfachen Lösung, ab jetzt in jedes religionswissenschaftliche Buch ein Kapitel über ‚die Frau‘ einzufügen, wo vorher keines war, wird es auch nicht getan sein. Gender-Studies gehören nicht in ein separates Kapitel oder eine sonstige Enklave, sondern müssen in die ganze Breite des Forschungsspektrums als eine anthropologische Neubestimmung des homo religiosus eingehen, welche die ‚femina religiosa‘ und ihre Religiosität sowohl in den Entdeckungszusammenhang als auch in den Begründungszusammenhang der Forschung einbezieht.”<sup>59</sup>

Edith Franke notes that taking up results from gender studies makes possible more precise academic work in the study of religions as it corrects the notion of the field and enables a critical perspective towards society, religions and ideologies. She calls for a cross-fertilisation of the study of religions and feminist criticism with respect to the following points: (1) experience of women and men as a field for empirical research (e.g. interviews), (2) partiality and reflexivity: the necessity to reflect one’s own position, (3) contextuality and particularity: clear definition of the context for which a statement is valid, and (4) reconsideration of the subject-object dichotomy in the tradition of critical social empirical research. As in other academic and societal fields, the androcentric position must not be mistaken as impartial any longer.<sup>60</sup>

Randi R. Warne formulates it succinctly when she writes: “Androcentrism is a prescriptive ideological stance which is untenable on logical grounds.”<sup>61</sup> She regards the gender-critical turn in the study of religions as essential “not only for the intellectual integrity of our project, but for our plausibility and usefulness as intellectuals.”<sup>62</sup> The importance of a reflection of gender differences from the point of view of the study of religions is a recurrent issue in this work, particularly with respect to the representation of religions (chapter I, section 1.3.3) and as an aspect of the framework I suggest for integrative religious education (chapter IV, section 3).

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58 This is obviously not a problem of the study of religions alone, but is part of a societal context in which women are marginalised. Analogous observations can be made e.g. for women in politics (e.g. the famous “first ladies”) or in sports (e.g. that women’s sports are often labelled explicitly “women...”, for example, in the “Women’s Championship” in football while men’s sport is regarded as the norm which is given far more attention).

59 Pahnke 1993: *Feministische Aspekte einer religionswissenschaftlichen Anthropologie*, 22f.

60 See Franke 1997: *Feministische Kritik and Wissenschaft und Religionen*, 107-119.

61 Warne 2000: *Making the gender-critical turn*, 257.

62 *Ibid.*, 258.

## Social responsibility

The third recent development in the study of religions which I would like to outline briefly is the increasing acknowledgement of the social responsibility of the study of religions as an institution. Especially since it has become obvious also to the general public that religion is not a relic from the past which is gradually going to disappear, but which is very much present in societal and political life in various regions of the world, scholars of religions have become aware of their possible and actual contribution to public discourse about religion. In fact, in many countries the voice of scholars of religions with their impartial perspective on the variety of religions is virtually absent in public discourse, contrary to the voice of representatives of the different religious groups, who are frequently consulted, when it comes to statements about religious matters.<sup>63</sup> The manifold reasons for that cannot be discussed here.<sup>64</sup> What is, however, important is that more and more scholars – quite rightly – regard this as a problem and present ideas on how to change this unsatisfactory situation.

Kurt Rudolph, whose important paper “Die ideologiekritische Funktion der Religionswissenschaft” was published in *Numen* in 1978, regards a criticism of ideologies as an important aspect of the social responsibility of the scholar of religion. In a more recent article, he draws attention to the values of tolerance and humanity, which he describes as an inheritance of the Enlightenment. They can be a starting point for the study of religions:

“For scholars of religions, human rights are not part of a creed that one merely recites without conviction. Furthermore, despite the value-neutrality of work in the field human rights should not be left at the door when one is required to take stances on public issues. ... Here belongs the impetus to ideological criticism that I have described, as well as its various effects, whose potential contribution to public life must be emphasized more strongly than ever.”<sup>65</sup>

As an example of the kind of contributions to public life that he has in mind, he cites the charter of Remid, the Religionswissenschaftlicher

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63 This situation is described, for example, by Rudolph (2000: Some reflections on approaches and methodologies in the study of religions, 241) or Baumann (1995: “Merkwürdige Bundesgenossen” und “naive Sympathisanten”. Die Ausgrenzung der Religionswissenschaft aus der bundesdeutschen Kontroverse um neue Religionen) with respect to Germany and by McCutcheon (2000: Critics not caretakers: the scholar of religion as public intellectual) with respect to the United States of America.

64 The texts mentioned in the above note provide some points of this discussion.

65 Rudolph 2000: 242.

Medien- und Informationsdienst (Religious Studies Media and Information Service) in Germany.<sup>66</sup> This registered society, which was founded by young scholars of religion in 1989, communicates knowledge about different religions (with an emphasis on contemporary religion and new religious movements) "in order to foster a peaceful and tolerant coexistence of people and of the various religions and to facilitate mutual understanding and respect."<sup>67</sup> Rudolph emphasises that for the scholar of religions today it is very important to foster a climate of tolerance toward "the other" in academic and public life.

Similarly to Rudolph, who sees a close link between the criticism of ideologies and the criticism of religions in this respect, Edith Franke demands that the results of the study of religions should be used in public debates about religious and social conflicts in order to help objectify and clarify the problems. She writes: "Meines Erachtens sollte Religionswissenschaft die Religionskritik nicht nur als einen ihrer Untersuchungsgegenstände betrachten, sondern ihre Forschungsergebnisse zu kritischen Stellungnahmen heranziehen."<sup>68</sup> The study of religions as an academic discipline cannot itself provide any criteria for a critical assessment of religions. However, criteria can be developed out of political positions (Franke also mentions respect for human rights) and the study of religions can analyse carefully if and in how far religions and the creation of religious symbols stabilise and legitimise social inequalities. What Franke means is not a substantial evaluation of beliefs, but a close look at the consequences of particular religious beliefs for social life.<sup>69</sup>

Russell T. McCutcheon sparked off a debate about the scholar of religions as public intellectual. He also is concerned with the critical potential of the study of religions with respect to statements about religions and ideologies. McCutcheon regards scholars of religions as culture critics who ought to challenge the ideological mechanisms and alignments "whereby description becomes prescription and the local is represented as universal."<sup>70</sup> His criticism of the current – virtually ab-

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66 See [www.remid.de](http://www.remid.de).

67 Remid: Satzung §2 as cited by Rudolph 2000: Some reflections on approaches and methodologies in the study of religions, 242 (translation: Gregory Alles), the German original can be found in: [www.remid.de/remid\\_verein\\_satzung.htm](http://www.remid.de/remid_verein_satzung.htm).

68 Franke 1997: *Feministische Kritik und Wissenschaft und Religionen*, 118.

69 Cf. *ibid.*, 119. Franke mentions these tasks for the study of religions in the context of the relationship between a feminist study of religions and the criticism of religions. Her ideas about the possible contribution of the study of religions to public debates are, however, relevant not only with respect to gender issues.

70 McCutcheon 2000: *Critics not caretakers: the scholar of religion as public intellectual*, 177.

sent – role of scholars of religions in public discourse in North America points primarily at the concept of religion which the current study of religion has inherited from phenomenology and hermeneutics and which is still widely used: “religion is comprised of *sui generis*, non-falsifiable meaning derived from a private experience of mystery, awe, power, or the sacred ...”.<sup>71</sup> What is required is a fundamental reconsideration of the concept of religion which acknowledges the political and social aspects of religion:

“[S]o-called religious systems are perhaps the pre-eminent site for creating social continuity amidst the discontinuities of historical existence. If this was our understanding of religion, we would see all the more clearly just what is at stake when our colleagues obscure matters by uncritically teaching and writing on insider claims concerning certain behaviours and institutions being socially and politically autonomous systems of faith or salvation.”<sup>72</sup>

The debate about what the social responsibility of the study of religions exactly comprises and what its limits are, is certainly not uncontroversial.<sup>73</sup> On the contrary, it could hardly be any more diverse.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, that there is a social responsibility of the scholar of religions can hardly be questioned. In a political climate in which stereotypes predominate, an important function of the study of religion is to provide reliable analyses of religious systems. Apart from making its knowledge public, the study of religions can, moreover, have important functions as a provider of mediation for dialogue, as the academic discipline responsible for the development of curricula for integrative RE, and as social mediator in conflicts with a religious dimension, in particular in helping to overcome false or misleading images of other cultures which may be current in the media and public life.<sup>75</sup>

In contributions to public debates about religion, it is important not to simply reproduce the rhetoric of the innate relatedness between religions and conflict. As Michael Pye has pointed out, the potential for harmony ought to be studied just as the potential for conflict. To regard

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71 Ibid., 168.

72 Ibid., 177.

73 Cf. for example Donald Wiebe's response to McCutcheon's ideas about the scholar of religion as public intellectual at the IAHR world congress in March 2005 in Tokyo.

74 Cf. for example the very different papers which were presented in the panel “Angewandte Religionswissenschaft” (applied study of religions) at the conference of the *German Association for the History of Religions* in Erfurt in September/October 2003, see DVRG 2003: Thematisches Raster ([http://www.uni-erfurt.de/religion\\_im\\_konflikt/beitraege.htm](http://www.uni-erfurt.de/religion_im_konflikt/beitraege.htm)).

75 For this paragraph cf. Franke/Pye 2004: The study of religions and its contribution to problem-solving in a plural world.

religious diversity as a problem is a normative position, untenable on scientific grounds. Currently the link between violence, conflict and religion is all too present in the consciousness of many people, whereas the facts that religions also actually contribute to peace, and that there are various interesting models of religious pluralism in different parts of the world, are easily overlooked. Analyses of models of religious pluralism are as important as analyses of religious conflicts in order not to allow the so-called “clash of civilisations” to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, but instead to actively contribute to a peaceful coexistence of different religions.<sup>76</sup>

What I have described here are but spotlights on and opinions about recent developments in the study of religions, which are in many ways interrelated. The concept of religion and the delineation of the subject matter, as well as questions of methodology and the representation of religions, continue to be contested issues, particularly in the context of a growing internationalisation of the discipline. As these issues are important for an understanding of the study of religions as an academic discipline and, moreover, have implications for theory and methodology of integrative RE as the corresponding school subject, they will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

#### 1.1.4 Limitations of the study of religions

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, in the academic study of religions, the “field” or subject matter has to be delineated in such a way that it can be studied with the various methods of historical, social and cultural research. The fact that, in the study of religions, the approach to the variety of religions is not religious or normative in itself results in an exclusion of a certain type of questions which cannot be answered (and sometimes not even asked) from a secular point of view. Questions about, for example, the origin of “religion”, the meaning behind the variety of religions, the truth of religious claims etc. lie beyond the responsibilities or rather possibilities of the study of religions. The search for religious truth is no more appropriate a task of the study of religions than the evaluation of religious theory and practice or the attempt to identify the “essence” of any religion or even of “religion” as such. As aspects of its own theory and methodology, metaphysical speculations are beyond the reach of the study of religions, even

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76 See, for example, Franke and Pye (ed.) 2006: *Religionen nebeneinander. Modelle religiöser Vielfalt in Ost- und Südostasien*, and Wasim, Mas'ud et al. (2005) *Religious Harmony: Problems Practice and Education*.

though they are an important part of the field which is studied. Likewise, any integral understanding of the phenomenon "religion" or religion as such cannot be achieved with the methods of the study of religions. Moreover, an attempt to do justice to the self-understanding of the believers requires an anti-reductionism of the following kind: (1) no comprehensive explanation of "religion" as such may be given and (2) religion must not be understood merely as a function of something else.

Scholars of religions approach religions with a limited set of questions when they undertake a delineation of the field which is not already religious itself. Some aspects of religions, which may be important and constitutive for an understanding of religion(s) from an insider's point of view are therefore not directly accessible to the researcher, except from a study of testimonies of believers. The conflict between the role of the scholar of religions as representative of the discipline of the study of religions and his or her private interests in finding (religious) truth have often led scholars of religions to go beyond what is acceptable within the study of religions. A clear distinction is necessary between what can be said within the limits of the discipline of the study of religions and private insights or beliefs which are acquired through the study of religions. The descriptions of Michael Pye and Ulrich Berner with respect to questions which lie outside the strictly defined academic study of religions are helpful for an understanding of the limitations of the subject. Pye (1972) regards the following considerations as being beyond the reach of the study of religions:

"We may wish to examine the inner consistency of a belief system from a critical point of view, or to assess its consistency with our own manner of understanding the world, or its consistency or manner of conflict with the views of some philosopher or with the generality of scientific thinking in the world. We may wish to consider what kind of criteria might be appropriate for testing or evaluating the statements made by religious persons. Or we may wish to embark on the systematic formulation of value judgments."<sup>77</sup>

He emphasises the difference between the rationality of a scientific theory of religions on the one hand and philosophy on the other, which has various tasks, including the study of religions. A rational scientific theory of religions has to be independent from the rationality or irrationality of any religious system. Questions within religious or meta-physical circles are "questions to be set aside" by the scholar of religions.<sup>78</sup> Berner mentions the following ways in which the border of a

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77 Pye 1972: *Comparative Religion: An Introduction through Source Materials*, 31.

78 Cf. Pye 2000: *Westernism unmasked*, 226f.

strictly defined study of religions may be crossed: (1) criticism of ideologies, e.g. from the point of view of normative positions which have to be made explicit; (2) art, e.g. fiction;<sup>79</sup> (3) ethics, for example if principles like reverence for life, human dignity or tolerance are used in order to measure the extent to which religious teachings and practices are in harmony with or in opposition to those principles; (4) theology. Berner draws attention to the fact that there is always the danger of crossing the boundaries of the study of religions unconsciously or without making it explicit. It is important to clearly distinguish between theory formation in the study of religions and those ways of crossing the borders of the subject.<sup>80</sup>

It may be helpful to distinguish between the study of religions as a *discipline* and as an *institution*. While the study of religions as a discipline (i.e. the study of religions in a narrow sense) has to be methodologically agnostic with respect to values as well, the study of religions as an institution (i.e. the study of religions in a broader sense) can look at the same field from a subjectively justified point of view which has to be made explicit. This may be a political agenda (such as human rights, international law), an ethical or religious stance (such as reverence for life) or a pedagogical programme (e.g. emancipation). Then, criteria which are not produced by the study of religions itself serve as reference points for statements about different religions. Whatever those criteria are, it is important to make them explicit and to clearly indicate at which point the study of religions in a narrow sense is departed from.<sup>81</sup> To distinguish between the study of religions as a discipline and the study of religions as an institution helps to preserve the character of the subject on the one hand (in particular in its delimitation to theologies or philosophies) and on the other hand fosters an ability to contribute to social and political questions.

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79 Berner refers to Mircea Eliade's novels and quite rightly notes that the formal distinction between scientific literature and fiction seems to point to the border between what is within the limits of the study of religions and what is not, while the proclamatory impetus can in fact be found in both Eliade's literary and scientific work. Cf. Berner 1983: *Gegenstand und Aufgabe der Religionswissenschaft*, 114.

80 Cf. *ibid.*, 113-116.

81 For the distinction between the study of religions as a discipline and as an institution cf., e.g., Pahnke 1993. *Feministische Aspekte einer religionswissenschaftlichen Anthropologie*, 28.