

How religion became popular: The reconfiguration of religion in the modern breakthrough

This project analyses the interplay between fiction and religion in the process of the scientification of the concept of religion in the late 19th century

About the Project

A feature of the modern European history of religions is the specific interplay between the academic and the religious field. In the 19th century, the term religion was coined as a critical category in many disciplines ranging from theology to anthropology, history, ethnography, and psychology. This 'scientification' of the concept of religion had an eminent impact on the religious field, leading to new forms of the construction of new systems of belief, communal relationships, and practices understood as religious – which in turn retroacted on the academy.

While these dynamics gained some attention in contemporary approaches to the European history of religions, one important mediating occurrence has largely been overlooked. Literature, in the forms of novels, short stories, and dramas, was the first medium to illustrate and substantiate new perspectives on religion and served as an important catalyst. By concretizing abstract theories of religion in the form of narratives, different types of religious behavior, experiences, and social functions were connected with specific literary characters and plots. The poetic constraints and possibilities of the narrative genres, in turn, re-shaped the conception of religion. With the development of new forms of storytelling, stylistic devices, and narrative perspectives, literature can be shown to be a driving force in the dynamic interaction between the religious and the academic field.

In this way, even 19th century committed literature highly critical of religion has made a generative impact on the modern religious scenery, as it redefined what was seen as religious conduct. Within the project, the interplay between fictional narratives and dynamics in the modern history of religion will be analysed with respect to the modern breakthrough, a pan-Scandinavian literary movement that had its heyday between 1870 and the 1890s. Declared by Georg Brandes in the early 1870s, the modern breakthrough defined religion as one of the core 'problems' to be debated in literature. Adapting theories of religion as an inward phenomenon (in the line of Schleiermacher), a social fact (in the line of Rousseau), or an outmoded way of thinking (in the line of Feuerbach and the British evolutionists), the novelists early on developed multi-layered concepts of religion as a simultaneously psychological, sociological and historic problem. While historicizing religion and commenting on contemporary theories of religion, the writers cultivated new modes of religious speech and identity. Detaching God from religion and suggesting it as a human phenomenon, they allowed for a reevaluation of the concept of religion and prepared for new non-traditional forms of religiosity.

Objectives

The project provides an analysis of the interplay between fictional narratives and dynamics in the history of popular religion, integrating narratological approaches and constellation analysis into the framework of cultural history.

Cooperation

The study is part of a project on the scientification of 'religion' in the 19th and early 20th century, which is conducted in collaboration with the University of Basel (Switzerland).