

Return of Religion, theological turn? The humanities and their religious wound

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During the last decade, religion emerged as a central topic of the humanities as in debates on the secular, in the renaissance of political theology, and historical studies. The paper discusses this renaissance in respect to the history and epistemology of the humanities. It argues that the formation of the humanities in the 19th century set up a complex and ambivalent relationship to religion which became an inner wound: a blind spot both in epistemological and in normative terms. The recent renaissance can be interpreted as correcting this situation; however, it also tends to reify religious moments into a new absolute. The paper argues that the task of the humanities in this situation should be to understand the complex role of religion and its afterlife in culture, which has to include a critical reflection on the role of religion in the development of the humanities themselves.

After 9.11. religion has become more and more prominent in American and European public and intellectual discourses. At least in Europe, this prominence is surprising since it contrasts a general disinterest in religious debates in the preceding decades and did not correlate an actual religious situation. The role of the humanities in these recent discourses, however, is rather limited, since more often than not, concerns of religion are rather debated in terms of politics, if not security. If humanities interfere, they sometimes even play a dangerous role, developing generalizations (e.g. about monotheism as such, about 'the' Jewish or 'the' Christian tradition etc.) that in turn are used in the cultural wars about a 'clash of civilization'. By contrast, the specific knowledge of the humanities is rarely used to criticize such concepts or to deconstruct the aporias of the European relation both to religion and to other cultures.

This strangeness, helplessness, or weakness of the humanities in respect to religion is not accidental. It is part of the peculiar history of the humanities, in which religion played a problematic role. Genealogically, the understanding of religion was crucial for the constitution of the humanities as specific form of knowledge and for the development of methodological tools. Even more important, the conceptualization of religion is essential for the implicit normative and political agenda of the humanities. Be it that they are conceived in the tradition of the enlightenment critique of religion or that they claim to supplement the lack of normative foundation after the decline of religion, the latter remained the essential paradigm for combining normative claims and forms of knowledge. It is therefore essentially to unfold the history of humanities in respect to religion not only to understand the return of religion in intellectual discourse, but also, in a wider sense, to debate the normative claims of the humanities, its possible contribution to a politics of knowledge and a specific form of critique.

Since it is difficult to discuss the humanities in general, I will limit to the specific German 'Geisteswissenschaften' as a specific and influential formation of the humanities. I will briefly sketch its development in three steps: its foundation around 1800, its high time around 1900 and the current situation; steps which go along with three crisis as its relation to religion is concerned.

I

The roots of the specific German 'Geisteswissenschaften' go back to the late 18th century. Apart from the broader heritage of the studia humaniora, it was basically the enlightenment and its development of the art of critique, the historical consciousness, and the modern university which proved essential for the development of modern humanities. In Germany however, two specific differences were effective: First, due to Germany's biconfessional history, religious and theological discourse played a fundamental role up to the 18th century; in turn, the German enlightenment had a complicated relation to religious questions and cannot be conceived according to the standard model of French anti-religious enlightenment. Second, the relative weakness and belatedness of the German enlightenment also affected its political claims which rather tend to compromise with the feudal authorities; especially after the French revolution, German enlightenment thinkers usually look for political conceptions that would avoid the 'anarchy' of a democratic state.

Both features can be seen in the work of Kant who consistently uses religious analogies in his *Critiques* without ever directly confronting theology: The truth of philosophical discourse, which is neither empirical knowledge nor mere opinion is compared to firm faith, the moral renewal is figured both as 'conversion' and as 'inner revolution', the moral postulates, as far as their realization is concerned, are described as the 'ultimate good' etc. Only later, he also gives a philosophical interpretation of religion which allegorically uses religious language to describe his philosophical project: In the *Religion within the Limits of Reason* Christian dogma coincides with critical philosophy, e.g. when Kant figures the moral community of the public sphere as 'invisible church'. This compromise relies heavily on the construction of an 'other' religion, namely in Kant's polemic against Judaism as a "religion which is not truly a religion" (but a mere political regime), whereas a 'reasonable' Christianity is conceived as a moral doctrine that supplements and founds politics. To give another example, the young Hegel will also formulate an alternative concept of community by referring to the ideas of 'Geist' and 'Leben' from the Christian tradition, ideas that will later become central for the 'Geisteswissenschaften'. His own 'Geisteswissenschaft' develops a broad analysis of culture in which the protestant tradition is the central thread.

The new Form of 'Wissenschaft' and 'Bildung' (which both carry heavy religious undertones) thus claim both to replace and to inherit the central role of theology as normative discourse in society and education. It formed a coalition with cultural Protestantism which is expressed in the organization of the Humboldtian University, in which the theological faculty paralleled the philosophical faculty. The normative claims of humanities, its method and (even more so) the its ethos were determined by this coalition, e.g. when philology rather wants to serve his object than to criticize it. Moreover, even when this model is explicitly called into question as in the critical turn of the left wing Hegelians as Heine, Feuerbach and Marx, religion remained the model for their critique of the bourgeois culture, e.g. in Marx' concept of fetishism. Thus, as the 'Geisteswissenschaften' reached the state of normal science during the mid 19th century, religion was important precisely because it was latent: no longer an established object of a direct discourse on it, it was nevertheless the matrix of the 'religion of history' and the 'religion of art' that the humanities tend to imply.

II

The German model of Geisteswissenschaften underwent a success-story during the 19th century. It gained a central place in the rising German university, organized an entire series of emerging disciplines, and was widely exported in other countries. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, 'Geisteswissenschaften' suffered a certain discontent, facing the decline of its founding idea of 'Bildung' and the success-story of natural sciences that seem to surpass its own. Interesting enough, in the numerous debates on this crisis, religion played a central albeit not always explicit role: it was symptomatic for a latent epistemological as well as political problem of the 'Geisteswissenschaften' which it will permanently trouble.

Wilhelm Dilthey's classical foundation of the 'Geisteswissenschaften' around 1900 distinguishes between scientific explanation and historical understanding, using the philosophical tradition of Hegel and the theological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher. This does not only imply that he empathizes the understanding of historical or cultural phenomena as an 'experience' (Erlebnis) with at least possible spiritual implications. At the same time, the development of historic understanding itself became an important part of the self-narration of humanities; in Dilthey, as well as in many others, this development is conceived as a 'secularization' of religious practice into profane knowledge. This narrative and thus also the problem of the religious past remained central for the 'Geisteswissenschaften' further on.

Other discourses made the religious problem of the 'Geisteswissenschaften' even more obvious. Heinrich Rickert, developing an epistemology for a 'Kulturwissenschaft', relied on the distinction between the 'facts' of natural sciences and the 'values' of the humanities, a distinction which will be prominent in nearly all debates about the normative implications of the humanities in the 20th century. However, these debates often overlook the heavy theological overtones of the idea of 'values' that became especially evident in Georg Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* or in Max Weber's concept of a 'polytheism of values'; in Weber, moreover, the religious legacy of Protestantism and the narrative of secularization did play an important role again as the matrix of modernity.

At the fringes of this new epistemological situation a new and powerful critique of modernity recurred to figures of religion as well. Especially after World War One, an older cultural criticism adopted religious language for an ideological criticism of bourgeois culture, including the humanities and their shortcomings: Dialectical theologians castigate the modern culture and especially cultural Protestantism as idolatrous, political theorists as Carl Schmitt condemn modernity for its loss of theological foundations, philosophers as Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger adopted Christian ideas to reformulate phenomenological philosophy, writers as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem refer to Messianism to develop an alternative to a 'bourgeois' concept of history. These critics and their ideas of a 'dialectic of enlightenment' in a way turned the central thesis of secularization on its head, claiming that the modern world is rather a re-enchantment of rationality than its victory. Quite often, religious models (fetishism, allegory, salvation) became operative as tools of analysis of modernity, including the sociology of knowledge and the analysis of mass media. Thus, whereas religion transgressed the boundaries of 19th century episteme, these moments of transgression also remained both unsettling and fruitful for the episteme of 'Geisteswissenschaften'.

III

The history of the humanities in the 20th century did not follow these impulses for the most part. The forced exile of a large part of Geisteswissenschaften interrupted their development; after World War II, a changed political and intellectual climate directed the humanities back into more established, disciplinary lines. Sociology became a normal social science outside the realm of the humanities, who tend to replace the ambitious program of an analysis of modern culture to the understanding of cultural artifacts according to the established disciplines. However, lacking the ideological background of 'Bildung', the post-war 'Geisteswissenschaften' mostly give up their normative claims and suffered a functional crisis which became constant in the second half of the century.

During this epoch, as during the 19th century, religion sunk into oblivion or became a mere object of normal science. Theology dramatically lost importance and influence in the university, religious studies generally remained weak and marginal. The concept of secularization and the ambivalent relation towards the religious past was replaced by the rather unilinear theory of modernization which conceived religious phenomena as belonging to a distant past.

By the late eighties however, due to political as well as intellectual reasons as diverse as the end of cold war and the decline of major theoretical paradigms, religion reentered academic discourse. Besides the rising historical interest in historic religion, there was also a major theoretical interest as in Philosophies 'turn to religion' (in Jacques Derrida, Jean Luc Marion, Jacques Nancy and others) or, even more striking, in the renaissance of Political Theology (in Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Claude Lefort etc.). Again, theological concepts and religious ideas proved important for a new analysis of modern culture and thought and unsettled the division between established discourses, namely between philosophy and politics.

Fruitful as these impulses have been, they are also problematic in more than one respect. Remarkably the turn to religion coincides with a contrasting move in religious studies, namely to give up 'religion' altogether as a concept which is too broad and too eurocentric. By contrast, the recent discourses use 'religion' and 'theology' rather vaguely, mostly implicitly limiting themselves to Christian religion (or to constructions as the Judaeo-Christian tradition), often contrasting it with the 'other' religion, namely with Islam. This approach has all too obvious political implications and usually repeats older concepts and discourses without acknowledging it, e.g. the protestant ideas of secularization as fulfillment of Christianity (as in Vattimo and Nancy) and Rudolf Bultmann's 'presentist' eschatology (as in Agamben).

More generally, the forgetting of humanities own complex relationship to religion leads recent discourses to substantialize religious phenomena. This is probably most obvious in political theology: Instead of analyzing the complex relationship between religion and politics or even religious remnants and revenants in actual political discourses, the latest theories tend to debate political question in theological terms, using the latter in a quasi metaphysical way as a foundational discourse. If the European uneasiness with the religion of the other – particularly with Islam, to a certain extent still with Judaism – only mirrors the uneasiness with its own religious past, the recent discourses on religion tend to override this past by exploiting religion to allegorize their own theoretical position.

IV

To escape this uncomfortable situation, several things are needed: The humanities have to reflect on the epistemological problems that go along with any analysis of religious phenomena, including the problems of the concept. They should be eager to avoid all too simple discourses of an inevitable secularization, but also to project 'the religious' as a supplement for the loss of metaphysics. They should be conscious of their own preconceptions and resistance towards religious phenomena and recognize the difficulties to deal with them, e.g. that there is not *one* discipline that may deal with it, but many. They should especially be aware the complex genealogy of humanities' relation to religion, as sketched above. If the underlying thesis that religion is and has mostly been a symptomatic blind spot (or inner wound) of the humanities, we might expect that large areas of this genealogy have been neglected so far; these are areas of necessary research. They are all the more important, since – beyond the specific problem of religion – it concerns the normative claims of the humanities which probably cannot be discussed without facing this heritage. In so far as religion has always been the 'other' of humanities' knowledge – be it that the latter claimed to translate or to negate the former – we might expect to learn a lot about ourselves from that perspective.

The recent interest in religion is thus both a symptom and a task in respect to the actual situation of the humanities. Probably, we should take the 'religious turn' more literal, for it might be quite characteristic for the epistemological situation of the humanities. Like the preceding (linguistic, iconic, pragmatic) turns it does less consist in a new super-theory but in acknowledging that certain problems and phenomena had systematically been excluded from the older order of knowledge and had to be rethought; moreover, that the rethinking of them entails a more general shift in the epistemological and disciplinary structure of the humanities. E.g. the linguistic turn does not (only) consist in recognizing that 'everything is language' but that we do not know what language is and that there is no peculiar discipline (i.e. linguistic) that will be able to describe exhaustively what language is. Similarly, religion shall be understood not as a specific realm of culture let alone its unifying foundational element, but as a constant problem that troubles the humanities both in respect to their epistemology and their political implications.