

33rd Biannual Conference of the German Association for the Study of Religion
(DVRW) in Hanover – September 3-6, 2019

Open Panel – Call for Papers

A common ground or a field of dispute?

‘Religion’ between experimentation, fieldwork and
philology

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Submission deadline: 28 February 2019

Intensive debates over the concept of ‘religion’ have now lasted for decades in the study of religion. Yet, despite numerous calls for abandoning the concept – due to historical and comparative reasons, or due to difficulties of operationalizing it for strictly defined research projects – it has continued to maintain central status for the discipline. Indeed, as J. Z. Smith noted at the very end of his famous article, “Religion, Religions, Religious”, religion “is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.”

Even a quick look at the field can confirm this claim. ‘Religion’ continues to work as a feature that binds various different research perspectives together through the implicit indication that supposedly they are all studying ‘the same phenomena’. Yet, as much as this situation brings about dialogue and attempts to combine different perspectives, such a ‘horizon’ also appears to act as a field of dispute. On the one side, discursively and constructively directed studies (from history, anthropology, etc.) focus on the ideological, cultural and social aspects of human life and thus typically employ ‘religion’ as a second-order category and which is simply a tool

for research. On the other hand, quantitatively and experimentally oriented research (in either sociology, psychology or evolutionary sciences) needs to define its object of research more precisely and thus too much emphasis on the negotiable and fuzzy-bordered nature of the concept would result in the impossibility of this kind of research in general.

In such a situation ‘religion’ appears to rather function as a field of dispute and not as a share common ground. Yet, regardless of one’s position in this dispute, its position as the “horizon” everybody aims for remains central. However, is this conceptual conundrum inevitable or can we overcome it? Is it possible to conceptualize ‘religion’ in such a way that takes into account the limitations highlighted by the critics while also specifying its features and attributes precisely enough for them to be studied experimentally? Or, does such a specification always go in conflict with discursively and constructively oriented research?

This panel welcomes all papers that analyse this complicated situation, either methodologically or theoretically or by focusing on specific case studies or research setups and the conceptual choices made therein.

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Conference website: <https://www.dvrw2019.uni-hannover.de/en/>

Submission of papers: <https://www.dvrw2019.uni-hannover.de/en/registration-and-submission/>

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