Troubles with a European Religious History

by Igor Pochoshajew

There are not many books written by German scholars on the religious history of the old continent. Anyone attempting to find a scientific periodical, written in the German language, on the religious history of Europe would be hard pressed to find such a text. The promising new series, "European Religious History" (Europäische Religionsgeschichte) [Gotzmann et al. 2001], first published in 2001 in Marburg, unfortunately did not continue after the publication of inaugural lectures. Christoph Elsas [Elsas 2002], could point in his publication on religious history only to Carl Clemens's book, [Clemens 1931] and to the publication of Günter Lanczkowski [Lanczkowski 1971]. Burkhard Gladigow [Gladigow 2006], who published his book on European religious history some years later, had three thematically relevant books to discuss: 1. Clemens; 2. Lanczkowski; 3. Elsas.

One may wonder why in a country like Germany, which has a very extensive, rich research tradition in humanities, important issues like European religious history have not been studied in detail. The new introduction to *Religious Studies,* (Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft) by Klaus Hock [Hock ^{2}2006], indicates a historical reason for this. The book explains that in his speech in 1901, Adolf von Harnack banned religious history from German theological faculties. From that point on, theological faculties were considered as only qualified to deal with questions relating to religion [Hock ^{2}2006, p. 162]. Religious studies experienced a marginalized existence within the German academic system. However, the marginalization of religious studies is not only an institutional phenomenon. In some scientific publications devoted to religious history, a marginalization of nontraditional theological subjects and non-Christian religions can be noted.

Taking a more in depth look at Elsas' [Elsas 2002] book, it is obvious the author's purpose is to study the history of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism up to present times. Despite his declared objective, to write a dialogical religious history, Elsas presents the three monotheistic religions as mostly isolated. The idea of communication between religions and religious exchange are hard to find in his book. Similarly, in a religious history written by Clemens [Clemens 1931], the author describes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as isolated blocks. In his work, historical encounters between religions are reduced to the expulsion of Jews by Christian powers, and to mutual expulsions of Christians and Muslims by Muslim and Christian states. Still, from the publication of Lanczkowski, we understand that the category of synthesis and cultural-religious dynamics from exchange exists as descriptive and analytical tools. This category is applied only as far as pre-Christian religions are concerned. Fortunately, we can see from the

same book why the author was unable to use the same approach for Christianity and Islam. Lanczkowski is of the opinion that with the Christianization of Europe, the transition from religious history to church history was accomplished [Lanczkowski 1971, p. 24].

If we take into account some 781 years (711-1492 AD) of Islamic history on the Iberian Peninsula, we must considered the quoted Christianization of Europe as a highly biased position. To think of European religious history as church history, one would need to overlook nearly 8 centuries, and start writing from the time of the *reconquista*. The term *reconquista* and the issue behind it is an ideological one, as Steven O'Shea [O'Shea 2006] rightly pointed out in his book *Sea of Faith. Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World*. With the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, an Islamic period on the opposite part of the European Mediterranean began. Only from these two historical accounts, and without paying much attention to details, can it be understood that the notion of the 'Christian Europe' is an ideological term, not a historical term. Other religions are well established in European history, but can barely be seen by someone who considers them to be dead and historically overcome [cf. Hock ^{2}2006, p.163].

We can see that our view of history and our selection of historical material for study are very much preconditioned by our convictions. This cannot be considered as a Christian or European phenomenon with colonial and Eurocentric attitudes behind it. If we take into account the marginalization of Christianity in books written in traditionally Muslim countries [cf. Körner; Hock et al. 2006], we realize that there is a certain analogy in biased approaches. Within the Islamic view, it is believed that Islam has replaced Christianity as the last true and inclusive religion. This perspective explains why school books in Muslim countries refer to historical forms of Christianity before Islam, but typically ignore expressions of Christianity in their own countries.

In modern Europe, Christian beliefs have lost importance as a basis for ethical orientation and world interpretation. The traditional Christian churches have lost their social importance to state institutions. As the current de-secularization of religion is regaining importance, it is mostly new Christian denominations, Islam, and Buddhism that benefit from this development. Why, under these circumstances in a country like Germany, is not it possible to open a scientific study on religious diversity in European history? Also, why is not it possible to analyze how historical encounters of opposing religions effected perspectives on religion? These questions and many others need to be studied.

Recently, voices spoke out on the historical diversity of religions in Europe. Peter Meinhold [Meinhold 1981], points out that Europe gained its spiritual identity through encounters of religion. Therefore, it is completely wrong to

claim Europe for Christianity. European spiritual history is essentially religious history, with church history being a part of it [Meinhold 1981, pp. 5-7; cf. Gladigow 2001, p 13.]. Thomas Bremer [Bremer 2006] calls Europe a continent of religious pluralism, and points to the mutual influence of religion in history. He speaks of a multicolored Europe, of a continent of diversity, exchange, and encounters [Bremer 2006, p. 76].

From a historical prospective, both authors are right, but their opinions have not resulted in any significant changes in scientific approaches or academic research. The reasons are not religious in nature, but rather they are cultural, and closely connected to the notion of singular culture. Singular culture does not only represent an important theoretical conception, but is also deeply rooted in public consciousness. It is this cultural conception that has most recently been criticized by Bremer [Bremer 2006] and Lepenies [Lepenies 1996]. Both scholars point out that only when a culture is conceived of as isolated and completed, such as Samuel P. Huntington's [Huntington 2002] perspective on a clash of civilization can occur. In reality, religions are a complex and changing phenomenon. They influence each other and borrow from each other.

However right Bremer and Lepenies are, the notion of a singular culture does not only influence the conceptualization of culture, but also shapes language. Often, it is also the basis of social organization and collective identity in national European states. To demonstrate the relevance of the singular culture for social life and collective identity, we can point to societies where cultural plurality has become a depreciative term, and cultural diversity is considered to be politically and socially harmful. On terminological level, terms like 'hybrid culture' or 'intercultural', which are mostly used in cultural studies, insinuate that 'pure culture' or 'singular culture' should considered normal. Since 'pure culture' does not exist [Glick 1992, p. 5; Lepenies 1996, p. 116], terminology should be used to clarify that culture works in exchanging various cultural traditions and borrows from different cultural reservoirs. From this point, it is clear that some cultural theoretical terminology is not only far from reality, but even counterproductive for the conceptualization of culture.

Lepenies [Lepenies 1996] is right with his ethical appeal to the west to become a culture of learning, and to abandon its attitude of teaching others. He also may be right with his predictions that the future depends on how cultural traditions are able to learn from each other, and develop their innovative potential [Lepenies 1996, p. 117]. From Lepenies' global prospective, useful insight for the current situation in Germany can be drawn. If statistics that 50 % of all children in Germany under six do not possess a traditional German background are true, then the educational system needs to offer students elements of identification that are compatible with the biography of 50 % of the future German population. If the educational system fails in this area, its disintegrating role will be more

noticeable in the next generation than is it now. Studying religion will help improve understanding of the cultural background of new German populations, as well as provide sensible solutions to social integration in Germany.

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