Reframing the History of New Religious Movements

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ABSTRACT: In this special issue of *Nova Religio* four historians of medieval and early modern Christianities offer perspectives on basic conceptual frameworks widely employed in new religions studies, including modernization and secularization, radicalism/violent radicalization, and diversity/diversification. Together with a response essay by J. Gordon Melton, these articles suggest strong possibilities for renewed and ongoing conversation between scholars of "old" and "new" religions. Unlike some early discussions, ours is not aimed simply at questioning the distinction between old and new religions itself. Rather, we think such conversation between scholarly fields holds the prospect of productive scholarly surprise and perspectival shifts, especially via the disciplinary practice of historiographical criticism.

KEYWORDS: Historians, reformation studies, new religions studies, conceptual frameworks, historiographical criticism, cross-disciplinary dialogue

The human sciences try to increase surprise. . . . They don't have much new data; they have to find new ways of looking at the familiar.[1]

– Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017)

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The five contributors to this special issue of *Nova Religio* met at the XXI World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in August 2015 in Erfurt, a provincial city in eastern central Germany. Erfurt's relatively small size, modern amenities, strong university, and well-preserved historic architecture made it a good location for the conference. The University of Erfurt, founded in 1379, is one of Germany's oldest. Erfurt was also the home of Martin Luther (1483–1546) during his time as a monk. The medieval Augustinian monastery where he lived from 1505 to 1511 still stands today, and the conference participants passed it regularly as they rode the city's ultra-modern tramway to the university. Thus, a dual-awareness of past in conversation with present impressed itself upon us and other visitors to Erfurt during the 2015 Congress. First, signs of the impending 2017 "Luther Jubilee" were already everywhere in evidence. Second, Erfurt's present infrastructure is built into medieval and early modern structures, and even the modern tram tracks appear to rest on centuries-old cobblestones. Indeed, the modern city is simply inconceivable without its medieval foundations.

The four main contributors to this special issue are all specialists in the history of variants of Christianity before 1700; our particular focus is on Europe's Dutch- and German-speaking territories, from the North Sea shore to the base of the southeastern Alps. Medieval and Reformation-era reformist and nonconformist movements are among the main subjects of our research. In other words, we are interlopers in the field of new religions studies. By some standards we might even be considered complete outsiders. In his preface to the second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, George Chryssides defines a new religious movement "as an organization or current of thought that has arisen within the past 150 or so years and that cannot be uncontentiously placed within a traditional world religion."[2] Still, we were welcomed warmly when we first sought conversation with new religions scholars. J. Gordon Melton, who was in the audience at our IAHR panel, was especially encouraging. Further, among the things we have learned in our engagement with new religions scholars is that there is no consensus around this or any other definition of new religions or new religious movements. This impression is confirmed, again, by Gordon Melton's Perspective essay in this special issue, in which he provides an overview of the developing field-defining discussions among specialists in new religions. Therefore, we hope that our contributions will deepen, enrich, complicate, and otherwise stimulate such ongoing discussions. The basic, shared goal of our essays is to encourage readers to reconsider well-known topics and subjects in new and maybe surprising ways. We hope to achieve the goal by providing evidence and reasons to support the argument that, notwithstanding certain conventions of classification, the *study* of new, emergent, and alternative religions

cannot be so readily separated from the *study* of "older" historical religions that taxonomically are Christian. Therefore, it is productive (even necessary) to extend the chronological and taxonomic frames within which we think about the subjects of this journal. The present and the past share a conceptual infrastructure, and while "new, emergent, and alternative religions" may indeed be all of those things, scholarship itself is built on and inseparable from old foundations.

Such a rethinking of present conceptualizations in relation to past patterns of both living and imagining religion is as relevant in our "home field" of Reformation studies as it is in new religions studies. In fact, critical historiographical reflection has been a major issue for discussion and debate among scholars of Reformation Europe in recent years, especially in the run-up to the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses (1517). The anniversary was most important for Lutherans worldwide. The Lutheran Church in Germany even declared an entire decade of celebrations and commemorative events culminating in 2017. Notions that *the* Reformation began with Martin Luther, or that Luther was the founder of a Christianity at once renewed and newly modern, have found support among most educated lay audiences and even with many historians. University textbooks tend to reinforce the supposed world-historical role played by Martin Luther, as did an array of public events for popular and specialist audiences alike in Europe and North America. In effect, Lutheran confessional histories and hagiographies have become the foundations for Reformation histories told well beyond Lutheran church communities—even the Vatican saw fit to issue a Luther commemorative stamp for 2017. At the same time, however, a significant number of historians have been working together to provide new ways of thinking about the reform movements of the early sixteenth century in their diverse social and cultural contexts. This activity is not new,[3] but recent examples of this rethinking are found in several conferences held in 2017. Among these were "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Reformation Era," and "Global Reformations."[4] Luther's career was a topic at each of these events, but it was by no means the primary focus. In these discussions, the central "fact" assumed by many histories of sixteenth-century Christianity recedes into the background or itself becomes a subject of critical analysis.[5] A key example of this reflection on the narrative assumptions underlying the story of "the" Reformation is Peter Marshall's important book on the history of the Luther legend, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (2017).[6]

Marshall's book contains a masterful demonstration of what we call "historiographical criticism." By historiographical—as opposed to historical—criticism we mean: asking questions about the meaningful framing of particular data. Rather less frequently does it entail changes to data sets. The academic study of religion (like all fields with historical

dimensions) is founded on a great number of historiographical schemes, models, and conceits. At the broadest level these include stories of founders and origins, innovation and continuity, progress and decline, and the like. They are difficult to avoid, since people (scholars included) rely on shared story-telling structures to make sense of both the past and the present. We think it crucial to reflect upon these historiographical deep structures, because they are not merely interesting side notes or matters best confined to literature reviews and annotated bibliographies. Rather, they are inherent to the very practice of scholarship in fields such as Reformation studies.

The same holds true, we contend, for the field of new religions studies. There are many approaches prominent in religious studies that clearly entail muscular historiographical models. For example, many sociologists of religion have firmly established the historiographical framework known as secularization (and now, de-secularization, post-secularism, and so on).[7] Indeed, according to sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman, this particular "implicit narrative of loss . . . is constitutive of our very field."[8] The historian Benjamin J. Kaplan has recently remarked, similarly, that the secularization paradigm will likely continue as the dominant frame until another historiographical model with comparable utility or capability is established.[9] Elsewhere—and to take a quite different example—there have been efforts to criticize the "history of religions" by historicizing both practitioners themselves, as well as the broader conditions in which their work is done.[10] Indeed, in the 1990s, a more general critical movement, sometimes called "the historic turn" also made its presence felt in the academic study of religion. As the name implies, such critics embraced the utility of history to their projects.[11] And yet, some practitioners of the new historicism in religious studies, as in other human and social sciences, remain rather less attentive to the underlying historiographical schemes contained in those histories by which they now orient themselves. In sum, scholars of religion now frequently operate as what one might call intuitive or commonsense historiographers. To adapt or expand Ammerman's statement: implicit historical narratives of all sorts are constitutive of the field.

Our goal is to make the implicit explicit. To this end we think historians and religious studies scholars should take historiographical criticism seriously, as part of the reflexive self-critical practice in our overlapping fields. In one way or another, all of the authors represented in this special issue take up the challenge of historiographical criticism in their own respective areas of expertise. What we have all found is that supposedly key dates or fundamental social divisions acquire great symbolic significance once they have been embedded into basic narrative structures as markers of historical periods, turning points, or trends over time. Markers that once began as matters of mere heuristic choice and utility (say, the distinction of the premodern from the modern, or of the

Reformation-era "sect" from the embryonic "church") can become confused with historical "reality," and thus threaten to be unnecessary constraints on scholarly imagination.

In this special issue, Andreas Pietsch and Sita Steckel's article, "New Religious Movements before Modernity?" explores whether the consideration of medieval and early modern new religious movements is prejudiced by the persistent application of the epochal periodization dividing premodern from modern cases. Using the twin examples of Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) and his early followers and Hendrik Niclaes (1501-after 1580) and the Family of Love, Pietsch and Steckel demonstrate the presence of many key characteristics of recognized modern new religions in these premodern movements. They thus question the ultimate sustainability of a categorical distinction between modern and premodern new religions. Like Johannes C. Wolfart in his contribution to this issue, they contrast recent historical accounts of premodern religious diversity with the established image of the "monolith" of medieval religion. While the view of a single dominant religion/ Roman monopoly may have its origins in Protestant confessional historiography (likewise a subject of Michael Driedger's article), it also lives on in post- or non-confessional accounts, especially in sociological theories informed by scholars as diverse as Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). (Wolfart also detects it in the work of contemporary sociologists like Michele Dillon and Lori Beaman.) Thus, the reception of detailed historical work on diversity in premodern European religion, especially that of Herbert Grundmann (1935!), has not been widely recognized by sociologists because it contradicts the notion—key to sociological theory—of a historic *Einheitskultur* (unified culture/culture of unity; again, compare the "myth of cultural homogeneity" discussed in Wolfart's article). In typically understated fashion Pietsch and Steckel observe "historical work thus diverges thematically from new religions studies publications that mention historical religious movements. . . . " In other words, the framework of modernization means that sociologists have created differential orders of diversity and innovation, with newer orders mattering more. Pietsch and Steckel thus see in the current scholarship an implied second "new" before the one explicit in "new religions studies," one which they challenge by demonstrating that a great range of examples may also be viewed in a *longue durée* of religious diversity, religious choice, and deliberate religious innovation.

Like Pietsch and Steckel, Michael Driedger looks closely at both sides of the premodern/modern divide. In particular, he examines some of the most deeply ingrained presuppositions in the presentation of so-called "radical" variants of early modern Christianity. Though the era of condemning and persecuting such groups for their divergence from the confessional mainstream has long passed (in most quarters), Driedger

illuminates just how much power certain representations, especially of the notorious Münster Anabaptists, continue to exert over our view of what was mainstream/normal versus radical/alternative in the past. In particular, Driedger considers the ongoing influence, including in new religions studies, of Norman Cohn's representation of the Münsterites in his influential book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957). This representation Driedger re-places in the broader context of Cohn's other works, as well as in relation to his political-pedagogical aims. Driedger further identifies Cohn's dependence on one particular source: the highly polemical chronicle of the episode at Münster by Hermann von Kerssenbrock (1520–1585). Like Kerssenbrock, Cohn ultimately used the Münsterites to narrate a political fable for his own purposes and times, an interplay between current social politics and scholarship that Wolfart also observes in his article. Via Cohn, polemical concepts from the past have been imported into modern scholarship as concepts for understanding the very past from which they came. The effect, as Driedger points out, has been the firm establishment of a key origin myth of modern religious violence, as well as an important element in the widely received typology of new religions: a confessionally and polemically motivated equation of apocalyptic belief with violence. Despite an advertised attitude of post-confessional openness, key contemporary scholars such as Lorne Dawson and Philip Jenkins continue to propagate implicitly confessional, polemical, and prejudicial categories via such typologies (even when this is counter to their explicit claims). In effect, Driedger is suggesting changes to the reading lists of new religions scholars: remove Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* and replace it with *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975), a less-famous but more important book by the same author and one that has influenced early modern historians in a productive rather than a distorting way. Driedger's ultimate point, then, is not simply corrective, but also calls for ongoing dialogue between those scholars of new religions who draw on examples of religious life in the past in their arguments, and the academic historians who specialize in those past religious expressions. Both groups share an interest in avoiding the perpetuation of simplistic, morally questionable narratives.

Johannes Wolfart's consideration of the comparable and intersecting field of religious diversity studies suggests that the apparent newness of religious diversity in the contemporary world is largely an effect of a methodology that minimizes the appearance of diversity in the past. Indeed, it seems that past diversity and present diversity are commonly established in scholarship using two different methods, resulting in the appearance of what is actually a false trend of increasing religious diversity. In particular, metric methods derived from sociology are applied to recent developments in Canada, the United States, Germany, France, and Australia, whereas theological concepts inherited from older scholarships (like those treated by Pietsch and Steckel, as well as by Driedger)

are deemed sufficient to represent the past as an era of greater religious unity/lower religious diversity, and, in the extreme case, as a unified Christendom. This "schizomethodology" results in a kind of "second order" or "derivative" anachronism of a trend or process of religious diversification. In the end, Wolfart argues, the considerable political and moral consequences—especially in the current climate of populist nativist revivals—of insisting on increasing religious diversity as a historical development are simply not warranted on scholarly grounds. Wolfart points out that in recent years otherwise post- or non-confessional scholarship has nevertheless continued the trend, not because scholars necessarily continue to adhere to particular faith orientations, but because their historiography is methodologically weak. That is, the newer developments in religion are not misrepresented due to scholarly hostility to new religion, but because the older developments, against which they are inevitably compared, continue to be misrepresented.

All three articles in this collection, then, tend towards one overarching purpose: the demonstration of how religions in the present—including and especially those widely deemed to be new religions—are detected and presented in relation to various conceptual frames from and about the past. While it is not necessary to study the new in terms of the old, there is a danger that the less attention we pay to old foundations, the more we might assume that they play no constitutive role whatever in the present. To return to the infrastructural metaphor from the beginning of this introduction, we want to draw serious attention back to ways that studies of "modern" and "new" religions almost always rest upon ancient cobbles. Therefore, some ongoing dialogue between historians and practitioners of other disciplinary approaches to the study of religion is desirable or even necessary: not only in order that we not get things wrong, but also that we see our interpretative frames and assumptions with fresh and inquisitive eyes.

ENDNOTES

[1] Quoted from William O'Connor, "Something I Learned from J. Z. Smith," *The Religion Bulletin: The Blogging Portal of the Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, 6 February 2018, http://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/, accessed 12 February 2018.

[2] George D. Chryssides, "Preface," *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), xiii.

[3] The work of Robert Scribner (1941–1998) provides good examples. See "Interpreting Religion in Early Modern Europe," *European Studies Review* 13 (1983): 89–105; and *The German Reformation* (Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1986), especially ch. 1 ("Some Reformation Myths").

[4] "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Reformation Era," a conference of the Verein für Reformationsgeschichte / Society for Reformation Research,

Nuremberg, Germany, 18–31 July 2017; and "Global Reformations: Transforming Early Modern Religions, Societies, and Cultures," a conference held at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto, 27–30 September 2017.

[5] For examples, see the special issue ("Piety and Reform in the Early Reformation") of *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 40, no. 4 (2017), especially the introduction by Andrew Gow and Robert J. Bast; as well as Carina L. Johnson, David M. Luebke, Marjorie E. Plummer, and Jesse Spohnholz, eds., *Archeologies of Confession: Writing the German Reformation, 1517–2017* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); and Sita Steckel, "Story Street Is a One-Way Street: Concluding Thoughts on Cultural Entanglement and Historical Narration," in *Transkulturelle Verflechtungsprozesse in der Vormoderne* [Processes of Transcultural Entanglement in the Premodern Era], eds. Wolfram Drews and Christian Scholl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 252–75.

[6] Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[7] The classic articulation of secularization as a historical process is that found in Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), esp. ch. 5, "The Process of Secularization"; for a resumé of pragmatic criticisms, see José Casanova, "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective," *Hedgehog Review* 8 (2006): 7–22; for theoretical critique of the basic concept, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); for implications of de-secularization/post-secularism for the academic study of religion, see Amanda Porterfield, "Religious Pluralism, the Study of Religion and 'Postsecular' Culture," in *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, eds. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 186–201; also, James A. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51 (2012): 1–15.

[8] Nancy T. Ammerman, "The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity," *Social Compass* 57, no. 2 (2010): 154–67, 155.

[9] General Plenary Address to the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, 17 October 2014.

[10] For example, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); also, the diverse critical essays in Bryan Rennie, ed., *Changing Religious Worlds: The Meaning and End of Eliade* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

[11] For a critical overview, see Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), especially essays by Geoff Eley and Craig Calhoun. The wide range of "uptake" on the part of religionists may be illustrated by differences between the playful provocations of Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 225–27, the earnestness of Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and the sometimes strident polemic of Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).