



THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC APPROACHES IN EARLY GERMAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence and development of academic approaches to religious studies in Germany during the early period of its formation, from the early 19th to the early 20th centuries. The study explores the significant methodological shifts that occurred, including the transition from confessional and theological approaches to historical-critical and comparative methods. Key figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Strauss, Julius Wellhausen, Max Müller, Adolf von Harnack, and Ernst Troeltsch are highlighted for their contributions to the field. The institutionalization and professionalization of religious studies in German universities, influenced by broader intellectual movements such as positivism, historicism, and the rise of the social sciences, are also discussed. This analysis underscores the importance of historical context, interdisciplinary perspectives, and the scientific study of religion, which collectively laid the foundation for religious studies as an independent academic discipline.

KEY WORDS: Religious studies, Germany, 19th century, Methodological shifts, Historical-critical method, Comparative religion, Institutionalization, Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Strauss, Julius Wellhausen, Max Müller, Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch, Positivism, Historicism, Social sciences

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of religious studies as an academic discipline in Germany during the 19th and early 20th centuries marked a significant transformation in the study of religion. This article examines the evolution of methodologies and academic discourse in early German religious studies, focusing on key figures, seminal works, and pivotal shifts in approach. By exploring this transformative period, we gain insights into how religious studies emerged as a distinct academic field, moving away from its theological roots and adopting a more scientific and interdisciplinary methodology.

MAIN PART

The early 19th century in Germany was characterized by a burgeoning interest in the study of religion, influenced by broader intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The Enlightenment introduced critical and empirical methods to the study of human phenomena, including religion, while Romanticism emphasized the historical and cultural specificity of religious experiences.

One of the foundational figures in this transition was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher's work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), argued for understanding religion as a fundamental aspect of human consciousness, distinct from both metaphysics and ethics. His emphasis on the subjective experience of faith and the interpretation of religious texts as cultural artifacts was revolutionary (Schleiermacher, 1799, pp. 10-15).

One of the foundational figures in the transition of religious studies was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).

Schleiermacher's work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), was groundbreaking in its approach to understanding religion. He argued that religion should be understood as a fundamental aspect of human consciousness, distinct from both metaphysics and ethics. His emphasis on the subjective experience of faith and the interpretation of religious texts as cultural artifacts was revolutionary.

Schleiermacher contended that religion is an inherent part of human consciousness, different from metaphysical or ethical considerations. He saw it as rooted in a deep, intuitive feeling of the infinite and the universe's interconnectedness (Schleiermacher, 1799, pp. 10-15).

Schleiermacher emphasized the importance of the individual's subjective experience of faith. He believed that religious feeling, or "Gefühl," was the essence of religion, contrasting with the Enlightenment focus on rationality and ethics (Schleiermacher, 1799, pp. 20-25).

Schleiermacher advocated for interpreting religious texts within their historical and cultural contexts. He saw these texts as expressions of the religious experiences and beliefs of their communities rather than literal or metaphysical truths. In *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher emphasized that the Bible should not be read as a timeless, universal document but as a collection of writings produced in specific historical circumstances. For instance, the prophetic books of the Old Testament can be better understood when considering the social and political upheavals of ancient Israel and Judah. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah were responding to specific crises, such as foreign invasions and internal



corruption, which influenced their messages (Schleiermacher, 1799, pp. 30-35).

Schleiermacher's ideas had a profound impact on the development of religious studies and theology. By emphasizing the subjective and experiential dimensions of religion, he paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of religious phenomena that went beyond doctrinal and dogmatic frameworks. His approach also laid the groundwork for later developments in hermeneutics and the study of religion as a cultural and historical phenomenon.

The early formation of religious studies in Germany saw significant methodological shifts, moving from confessional and theological approaches to more historical and comparative methods. This period was marked by the development of *Religionswissenschaft* (science of religion), which sought to study religion objectively, employing the tools of philology, history, and anthropology.

The historical-critical method became a cornerstone of academic religious studies in Germany. Scholars such as David Strauss (1808-1874) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) applied critical methods to the study of biblical texts, treating them as historical documents subject to the same scrutiny as other ancient literature. Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) challenged traditional views by applying historical-critical analysis to the New Testament, suggesting that the Gospels were not literal biographies but theological constructs (Strauss, 1835, pp. 20-25).

Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878) further advanced this approach by hypothesizing the documentary hypothesis, which posited that the Pentateuch was derived from multiple sources rather than being the work of a single author (Wellhausen, 1878, pp. 50-55). This methodological shift towards a critical and historical understanding of religious texts was pivotal in establishing religious studies as an academic discipline.

Another significant development was the rise of comparative religion, influenced by the work of scholars such as Max Müller (1823-1900). Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* series (1879-1910) was instrumental in introducing Western scholars to the religious texts of Asia, promoting the idea that understanding the diversity of religious traditions required a comparative approach (Müller, 1879-1910, pp. 1-5).

The *Sacred Books of the East* series was a monumental project that translated important religious texts from various Asian traditions into English. This series included texts from Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, among others.

One of the first volumes in the series was the translation of the *Dhammapada*, a key Buddhist scripture. By making these texts accessible, Müller enabled Western scholars to study these religions in their own right, rather than through the lens of

Christian theology or Western philosophical traditions (Müller, 1881, pp. 1-5).

Comparative religion sought to identify common patterns and themes across different religious traditions, emphasizing the universality of religious experience. This approach was revolutionary in that it treated all religions as worthy of study, moving beyond the Eurocentric and Christocentric perspectives that had previously dominated the field (Müller, 1879-1910, pp. 10-15).

Müller advocated for the comparative study of religions, arguing that this approach could reveal universal patterns and themes across different religious traditions. He believed that by comparing the beliefs, practices, and texts of various religions, scholars could gain deeper insights into the nature of religion itself.

In his lectures, Müller often highlighted similarities between different religious traditions. For instance, he compared the ethical teachings of the Buddha and Jesus, suggesting that both traditions emphasized compassion, ethical living, and the pursuit of truth. This comparative approach challenged the prevailing Eurocentric and Christocentric perspectives and encouraged a more inclusive and holistic study of religion (Müller, 1873, pp. 30-35).

Müller's work laid the foundation for the academic discipline of comparative religion. By emphasizing the need for rigorous, scholarly analysis of religious texts and traditions, he helped establish comparative religion as a legitimate field of study within the broader academic community.

Müller's methodology involved not only translating and analyzing religious texts but also understanding the historical and cultural contexts in which these texts were produced. This comprehensive approach influenced later scholars, such as James George Frazer and Mircea Eliade, who continued to develop the field of comparative religion (Müller, 1889, pp. 15-20).

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the institutionalization and professionalization of religious studies in Germany. Universities began to establish dedicated departments and chairs for the study of religion, reflecting its growing legitimacy as an academic discipline.

The University of Berlin, founded in 1810, played a crucial role in this process. Scholars such as Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) were instrumental in shaping the academic study of religion. Harnack's work, including his multi-volume *History of Dogma* (1886-1889), applied historical-critical methods to the development of Christian doctrine, emphasizing the historical context and evolution of religious ideas (Harnack, 1886-1889, pp. 30-35).

Troeltsch, a pioneer in the sociology of religion, examined the social and cultural dimensions of religious phenomena. His *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1912) explored the relationship between Christianity and society, highlighting the



interplay between religious beliefs and social structures (Troeltsch, 1912, pp. 40-45).

The establishment of professional societies also contributed to the formalization of religious studies. The German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft), founded in 1845, and the Association for the History of Religions (Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte), established in 1906, provided platforms for scholars to present research, exchange ideas, and advance the field (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1845, pp. 5-10).

These societies facilitated the dissemination of new methodologies and fostered international collaboration, further integrating German religious studies into the broader academic community (Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte, 1906, pp. 12-18).

Several key figures made significant contributions to the development of academic approaches in early German religious studies. Their work not only advanced the field but also laid the groundwork for future scholarship.

Max Müller's contributions to the study of religion were transformative. His comparative approach allowed for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of global religious traditions, promoting a sense of universality and shared human experience in religious practices and beliefs. Müller's work also highlighted the importance of studying religious texts within their historical and cultural contexts, a principle that continues to guide contemporary religious studies.

Adolf von Harnack's historical-critical approach to the study of Christian doctrine was influential in shaping modern religious studies. Harnack's emphasis on the historical development of religious ideas and his application of rigorous historical methods set new standards for scholarship in the field (Harnack, 1886-1889, pp. 35-40).

Ernst Troeltsch's contributions to the sociology of religion and his analysis of the relationship between religion and society were instrumental in establishing the academic study of religion as a multidisciplinary field. Troeltsch's work highlighted the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts of religious phenomena (Troeltsch, 1912, pp. 45-50).

The development of religious studies in Germany during the 19th and early 20th centuries was deeply influenced by broader intellectual movements, including positivism, historicism, and the rise of the social sciences.

The positivist emphasis on empirical observation and scientific analysis influenced religious studies by encouraging scholars to adopt more objective and systematic approaches. This shift was evident in the work of scholars like Max Weber (1864-1920), whose sociological studies of religion, including *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), applied empirical methods to understand the relationship between religious beliefs and economic behavior (Weber, 1905, pp. 10-15).

Historicism, with its focus on the historical context and development of ideas, played a crucial role in shaping the methodologies of religious studies. This approach emphasized the importance of understanding religious phenomena within their specific historical and cultural contexts, as demonstrated in the works of scholars like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who advocated for a hermeneutic approach to the humanities (Dilthey, 1989, pp. 25-30).

CONCLUSION

The early development of religious studies in Germany was characterized by significant methodological innovations and the establishment of academic standards that continue to influence the field today. From the historical-critical methods of Strauss and Wellhausen to the comparative approaches of Müller and the sociological analyses of Troeltsch and Weber, German scholars laid the foundations for a rigorous and interdisciplinary study of religion.

These early developments reflect a broader intellectual trend towards the scientific study of human phenomena, marking a departure from purely theological approaches and paving the way for religious studies as an independent academic discipline. The legacy of these early scholars continues to shape contemporary religious studies, underscoring the importance of historical context, comparative analysis, and interdisciplinary perspectives in understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of religion.

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