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Approaches to the Study of 'Time' in the History of Religions

'Time' is one of the very fundamental dimensions of being, reality, experience, life and existence. Hence, 'time' is a 'topic' (or rather a 'chronic') that every science explicitly or implicitly has to tackle, and there are whole libraries replete with studies in one way or another relevant to the study of 'time'. Different sciences deal with the problem of 'time' in different ways. Moreover, in some sciences the conceptions of time have radically altered. The most prominent examples of course are physics and philosophy. 'Time', according to classical mechanics, is not the 'time' as perceived by the different theories of relativity. Kant's 'time' is not 'time' in the sense of Bergson or Heidegger, to name but some approaches. New philosophic trends, movements or developments, for instance perspectivism or cognitive philosophy, lead without fail to new interpretations, or theories, of 'time'.

This paper will review some of the ways in which the history of religions, or Religionswissenschaft, has dealt with the problem of 'time'. In a first section, some general problems will be briefly introduced. In the second section, some classical approaches will be discussed. The third section sketches some more

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1 A slightly revised version of a public faculty-lecture delivered at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University, December 7th, 1998, in connection with a conference on "Conceptions of Time" planned by the Swedish Society of Humboldt-Fellows (SSHF). The paper was originally submitted to Temenos in 1999.
2 For an anthology of the most important contributions see Zimmerli/Sandbothe 1993.
3 As an example one could refer to the lecture "Knowledge, Perspective, and the Metaphor of Time", given by Nils Bertil Thelin, Professor Emeritus of Slavic Philology at the University of Oldenburg (Germany), at the Annual General Meeting of the Swedish Society of Humboldt-Fellows (SSHF) in 1997 and distributed through this society. In his lecture, starting from a linguistic analysis heavily influenced by Peirce, Thelin suggested a "spatial origin of time" (Thelin 1997, 57).
5 In this paper I deliberately make use of the ambiguity of the English term 'history of religions' which at the same time denotes a subject of scientific enquiry and the academic discipline devoted to this enquiry.

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recent attempts. As usual, in comparison to other disciplines, as for instance cultural anthropology, theoretical reflections seem to be somewhat underdeveloped in religious studies.6

Some problems of a general kind

In practice, the history of religions deals mainly with ‘other’ cultures. Thus, almost every historian of religions when studying a particular religion, a particular period or region, comes across conceptions of time actually rather different from his or her own pre-conceptions. Often these differences emerge not so much on a meta-plane, that is in confrontation with well-articulated ‘conceptions’ or ‘theories’ of ‘time’, for instance in Buddhist or Greek philosophy, as on a much more basic level, e.g. that of language.

‘Times’ and ‘time’

Like every other historical discipline, historians of religion make use almost daily of time-related categories like eras, chronologies, or periods, but usually we are not concerned with questions like the, that the is one and only, ‘origin of time’ as such. These questions are addressed by philosophers, physicists and others. Maybe historians of religion are more sceptical towards such questions because their so-called ‘objects’, phenomena that are qualified as ‘religions’ or ‘religious’ aspects of something else like politics, poetry, philosophy, etc. notoriously offer different types of explanations on the ‘origin’ of time. The questions that a historian of religion might raise, then, lie on a different epistemological and methodological level.

As in other disciplines, even in the history of religions ‘time’ is not a static category, not least since it is well known that the very conceptions of ‘time’ change with time (see Withrow 1988; Dux 1992). Thus, for instance, the notion of an abstract ‘time’ is absent in early cultures. Obviously these cultures felt no need for ‘time’ in the abstract sense. ‘Time’ here usually relates to certain events and

6 For the state of the art in cultural anthropology see Gell 1996; Adam 1994, Munn 1992.
7 At the end of his survey on the state of the art (which, however, mostly discusses the cosmology woven around Maya conceptions of time), Aveni observes (1988: 331f): “As an outsider to the discipline, it strikes me that the literary canon of religious studies insofar as it pertains to the study of time is confined largely to philosophical reflection [...].”
actions. Similar observations have been made for tribal societies in which 'time' is often segmented according to social criteria: There is a time for sleeping, eating, rituals, hunting etc. (Gehlen 1995, 89) A similar attitude is articulated in the famous passage in the Biblical book, Kohelet (3,19).

The notion of abstract 'time' — 'time' as such, as it were — does not necessarily originate in indigenous, 'intracultural', developments. It may also have come into being through inter-cultural processes. Thus, a culture like China could look back on a long history of thinking about shi as a cluster of aspects of 'time' on a large scale. Nevertheless, China has not developed a notion of abstract 'time', but rather imported it from the West in the late 19th century (Mittag 1997, 255).

Time and language

The fundamental role played by language in cognitive processes is one of the fundamental 'discoveries' of the 20th century in Western thought. In some respects, Whorf's study on the Hopi, published in 1956 under the title Language, thought, and reality, has had a certain impact on recent philosophical discussion. Whorf's study is relevant here, for he argued that the Hopi have no concept of time. Even if Whorf's interpretation of the Hopi data is not correct (Malotki 1983) and even if one does not agree with Whorf's underlying theory, it is nowadays a widely accepted assumption that the tense-systems of languages very much shape the perception of time by their speakers.

The division of time into past, present and future is often held to be connected to the Indo-germanic tense-system. Thus it does not come as a surprise that the notions of 'time' are rather different in a culture like China. In Chinese, temporal structures are not expressed by inflection but, for example, by time-adverbs and time-particles. The absence of verbal tense is here compensated by the pervasive tendency to date everything. Usually a Chinese fairy-tale is not introduced with the expression "once upon a time" but with phrases such as the following: "in the year so and so of the government-device this and that". In this context it has been remarked that there are hardly any myths in China

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* In India of course this insight has a longer tradition.
* Following Lakoff and Johnson, one would now stress the importance of metonymy and metaphor for the cognitive construction of time (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).
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(Mittag 1997, 253–255). However, that cannot be understood as a causal connection, since the Romans too were not very good at inventing myths.

In the Semito-Hamitic languages, to take another example, the tense system is based on a bipartition, the distinction between perfect and imperfect. Moreover, by employing sentences without any verb, nominal sentences, these languages can make ‘timeless’ statements as it were. In Egyptian there are two words which one might, depending on the context, translate as ‘time’ or ‘eternity’ respectively: neheh and djet. These two words are of course much disputed in Egyptology. According to Assmann, on which the following account is based, neheh would be something like the virtual aspect of time, whereas djet would be the factual aspect, the result of ‘virtual’ time. Egyptian texts (“the Egyptinas”, as Assmann would have it), for example, explained neheh as ‘tomorrow’ and djet as ‘today’, however not in the sense of future or present, but in the sense of a virtual potentiality that might eventually materialise in a factual situation (Assmann 1983, 199–200).

In Egyptian, there is no generic term for ‘time’ above the duality of neheh/djet. Rather, time — including eternity — is the ensemble of the interplay between neheh and djet. As there is no generic term for ‘time’, so is there nothing transcending it. Apart from certain particular religious developments, like Echnaton’s failed reform, and contrary to certain Jewish ‘theologies’, the gods are not located above time, but rather in time (Assmann 1983, 203). Everything is included in the Uroboros, the snake biting its tail, which is the most prominent Egyptian image of time.

Three gods in particular are connected to time in the form of the course of the sun, namely Chepre, Re and Atum. Chepre is the sun-god at morning or in the shape of the morning-sun, Re is the sun-god at noon, and Atum the sun-god in the evening. Whereas Chepre, the sun-god at morning in a certain sense represents time in its virtual aspect, neheh-time as it were, Atum, the sun god in the evening, represents time in its factual sense, marking that realisation of virtual time which has been achieved in the course of the day, in other words the djet-time. In that way, Assmann suggests, Re, the sun-god in the shape of noon, might even be considered to be the hidden generic term for time. In a later period, however, the sun-god Re entered a new kind of relationship with Osiris, the god of death. In this constellation Re represents virtual-time, neheh, whereas Osiris represents factual time, the final form in which everything that has become is matured and preserved. Moreover, Osiris figures in two other pairs: together with Horus and Ba. Each of these pairs in different discursive
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contexts — cosmos, state and eschatology — illustrates the bipartite structure of time, the continuous union of the neheh- and djet-aspects. This continuity, however, is not something that is to be taken for granted, but it has to be created or enacted by continuous, punctual and rigid ritual performances in the temples of the sun-god. Thus, ritual is the basic means of constructing ‘time’ by keeping it in motion. If the necessary rituals are not performed — or not performed as they ought to be —, time, that is the ordinary course of events, risks standing still: the sun will not rise, the moon hesitates, the water does not run off and so on (Assmann 1983, 206–219).

Classical approaches to the study of ‘time’ in the History of Religions

To begin our survey with a reference to the Hopi, Babylon, China and a sketch of Egyptian conceptions of what we might call ‘time’, follows closely a traditional approach in the history of religions as an academic discipline. As a matter of fact, the Egyptian example could very well illustrate certain ‘typical’ strategies of ‘time’-construction that one also finds in other areas of religious history. I will come back to some of these features at a later stage.

Here, I wish to highlight a more general aspect: Assmann’s study of conceptions of time in Egypt, on which the preceding paragraph was mainly based, is a typical example of the main approach to the study of time in the history of religions because it focuses on one single culture. In the case of ancient Egypt this culture corresponds to a certain religion, or rather a cluster of cultural aspects labelled by us ‘(ancient) Egyptian religion’.

It is merely an exception to the rule when one finds cross-cultural studies. By way of example, one could refer to Colpe’s essay on time in three Asian civilisations, namely Babylon, Iran and India (Colpe 1983). Usually, however, studies on time in the history of religions concentrate on one single religion, which is dealt with by experts familiar with a methodological craft, like philology or archaeology, enabling them to decode ‘their’ religion. In the meantime, a whole bunch of studies has appeared on conceptions of ‘time’ in certain cultures, such as Chinese or Western ideas on time.
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Anthologies

One common but rather superficial strategy to overcome specialist studies is to lump them together in anthologies. Typical volumes of that kind are an Eranos-Jahrbuch of the early ’50s with contributions on India, Gnosticism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Taoism, an UNESCO-volume, Cultures and Time, from 1976 with contributions once again on India, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, China, but now also on Greece (Gnosticism and Zoroastrianism being left out here). Last but not least, there is a volume entitled Religion and time edited by Balslev and Mohanty and published in 1993 in the NUMEN book series ("Studies in the History of Religions").

As a typical, but the most recent, example in this genre, Religion and time deserves closer scrutiny. The first section has two essays discussing the religious relevance of three modern European philosophers (Husserl, Kierkegaard and Heidegger). Non-European philosophies are clearly held to be of less importance. This may be regarded as a clear indication of an underlying eurocentrism. The bulk of the book is taken up by five rather long essays on different religions and their conceptions of time: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Without further arguments these religions are called the “the major world-religions” (Balslev & Mohanty 1993, 1). Nevertheless, the volume is called Religion and time instead of “Time in/and (major world-) religions”.

The five essays exclusive make use of textual sources and are devoted to the history of ideas, or the history of religious ideas on time. All the contributions ambitiously set themselves a double and, to my mind, partly contradictory goal: On the one hand, they usually draw an impressive picture of the development and the controversial nature of conceptions of ‘time’ in the different religious traditions, while on the other hand all of them implicitly aim at elaborating a doctrinal or religious kernel as a distinguishing, unique and basic set of conceptions of ‘time’ in the respective religions. ‘Religion’ is here for the most part taken as a cluster of certain characteristic ideas, world-views or theologies as formulated by specialists or intellectuals.

Pande shows how Buddhism devalues the significance of time, when he states: “Buddhism does regard time as an aspect of causality to be the deepest feature of conditioned reality. But it does look beyond it to the attainment of the timeless, unconditioned reality. Time is phenomenally real and where there is time there is suffering and death. There is, however, an ultimate spiritual goal where time is not real and on attaining which freedom is realized” (Pande 1993,
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207). Apart from, or rather in spite of this and a few other general statements of this kind, Pandé’s essay illustrates the lively discussion about ‘time’ or questions related to ‘time’ in numerous Buddhist schools and denominations over the centuries.

Even this approach, however, does not really seem to work in the case of what is usually called Hinduism: Balslev’s essay has to admit time and again the extreme diversity of conceptions of time, for example, in the Brahmanical tradition. Her appeal to “a few broad and general insights that are common” to the different views are hardly convincing. Her substantialising reference to “the Hindu” with “its vast time-consciousness” (Balslev 1993, 163; see also 171) strikes me as even more problematic.

When it comes to the three religions of Middle Eastern origin the situation is equally complex. In the Qur’an, sura 45, verse 24 we find an explicit rejection of previous Arab attitudes towards ‘time’ considering ‘time’ as fate or destiny: “They say, ‘There is nothing but our life here below. We live and we die, and only Time destroys us.’ But they have no knowledge of this; it is only what they presume. And when Our clear revelations are recited to them, their only argument is: ‘Bring us back our fathers, if what you say is true!’ Tell them, ‘It is god who gives you life and causes you to die, and who will gather you on the days of resurrection, of which there is no doubt. Yet most men know it not.’” Disputes on conceptions of ‘time’ are of course also familiar from the Indian context. However, in the development of Islamic theology — the kalam — reference to the Qur’an and the Hadith were only one part of the picture. The intellectual instruments that brought about the articulation of Islamic theology with its subordination of ‘time’ under the one God were to a large extent adapted from the non-Islamic environment, especially Greek philosophy (Goodman 1993). It is difficult to guess how ‘Islamic’ Islamic theology would have become without these techniques.

Steensgaard’s and Manchester’s discussions of ‘time’ in Judaism and Christianity, respectively, face similar problems. In his impressive essay Steensgaard goes all the way from the different parts of the Hebrew Bible to modern Jewish theology. At one point he remarks: “In connection with the concept of ‘time’ in Judaism, it makes little sense to search for such among the Jewish philosophers of religion of the Middle Ages. This is so because their understanding of time differed from one another depending on whether they belonged to an Aristotelian school, as did Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), or whether they had been influenced by Neo-Platonism, as was Hasdai Crescas

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d. ca. 1410" (Steensgaard 1993: 103-104). Whereas Steensgaard regards this constellation as atypical, it seems very much the normal case to me: instead of hypostatising a 'pure' Jewish conception of 'time' and in that way reproducing the task of theologians who define what is to be considered as 'Jewish' or not, as a historian of religions I would rather look at Jews and their conceptions of 'time' in different historical and cultural contexts.

In his analysis of time in Christianity Manchester has to tackle a similar problem. He tries to show "from the work of Augustine and Kierkegaard how the Christian experience of temporality could give rise to philosophical thinking of originality and influence" (Manchester 1993, 133). Here it should be noted that Manchester does not hesitate to hypostatise "the Christian experience of temporality" — he uses the singular! He continues: "Other powerful modes of temporal experience have absorbed the Christian experience" — again the conspicuous use of singular! — "back into themselves, and some of these hybrids have been at least as influential as the distinctive mode" (Manchester 1993, 133) that he claims to be the one and only genuine Christian experience of time. Am I wrong in assuming that reality mostly is hybrid — and that the pure, genuine, authentic Christian experience is nothing more than a desk-product of an intellectual? Mutatis mutandis, this would then hold true for other religions as well.

In their introduction to Religion and time the editors express their hope that this "volume of essays focusing on the theme of time in diverse religious traditions ... will contribute towards an interreligious conversation" (Balslev & Mohanty 1993, 12). In a sense the volume very much corresponds to the typical model of the so-called 'dialogue of religions': Religious experts representing certain 'ancient' or 'great traditions' — certain other religions usually being excluded — talk in a peaceful atmosphere about abstract issues of fundamental importance. The only difference lies in the fact that in the case of Religion and time, with its fictitious 'interreligious conversation', scholars represent certain religions. In that exercise of interreligious conversation, the scholars play the part of indigenous experts such as theologians, priests, monks, gurus, jurist, etc. Each expert then tries to present his or her 'product' in clear outline by reducing it to a unique cluster of ideas. It is true that the so-called 'dialogue of religion' is a new form of religious practice and marketing but the things discussed in this context usually have rather little to do with the ordinary lives of ordinary members of these religions.

In his discussion of ancient Egyptian conceptions of 'time', Assmann has
to admit the fact that the theology of the sun-god as represented in thousands of texts was a product of experts which did not necessarily have anything to do with the conceptions of time of an ordinary Egyptian (Assmann 1983, 207). The same of course in principle is true for the five religions discussed in Religion and time. Behind the abstract notion of ‘time’ the contributors completely lose sight of basic forms of experience of ‘time’ such as for instance the festivals or calendars, which are not even mentioned once in the bulk of the essays.

‘Sacred time’

Calendars, however, were already a focal point in the first systematic treatment of time in the history of religions, published in 1905, reprinted in 1909 and written by one of the foremost masters of theory-formation in the social sciences, mostly renowned for his contribution to the study of sacrifice. I am here referring to the essay “Etude sommaire de la représentation du temps dans la religion et la magie” (“Summary Study on the representation of time in religion and magic”) by Hubert (Hubert/Mauss 1909).

The basic presupposition of this study is that religion and magic contain conceptions of time and space that are essentially different from ‘normal’ notions of these phenomena. A description of these supposed differences leads Hubert to the conclusion that religion and magic have a qualitative perception of time — in religion and magic time is not seen as a quantity consisting of homogenous parts that are easily to be measured. ‘Religious’ or ‘magical’ time according to Hubert, is susceptible to quality. Its parts are not homogenous and it is structured like a kind of rhythm (Hubert/Mauss 1909, 208–210).

In his analysis of calendars, however, Hubert furthermore argues that what he calls ‘a common quality’ is hidden beneath the distinctive qualities of the different parts of ‘religious’, or ‘magical’, time. Moreover, he assumes that this ‘common quality’ is to be identified with the sacred (Hubert & Mauss 1909, 221). Ultimately, Hubert states, all calendars fulfil a religious or magic function by first of all organising the periodical recurrence of rituals. According to Hubert calendars do not suppose a quantitative but a qualitative notion of time, composed of discontinuous and heterogeneous parts (Hubert & Mauss 1909, 228–229).

With his triadic discussion of religion, time and the sacred, Hubert’s approach has been extremely influential. The notion of the ‘sacred’, as is well
known, is shared by the sociological and the phenomenological schools.\textsuperscript{10} In both cases, the sacred is seen as the basic trait of religion. In order to address the 'religious' quality of something, phenomenologists mostly affix the attribute 'sacred' to the notion in question. Thus, in religious contexts a tree becomes a 'sacred tree', and religious conceptualisations of time are referred to as 'sacred time'. As a matter of fact, most phenomenological handbooks contain a section on "sacred time". In his Phänomenologie der Religion (Phenomenology of Religion) van der Leeuw dedicates five rather impressionistic pages to "sacred time" (van der Leeuw 1956, 434-439). Like Hubert, whom he surprisingly does not refer to, van der Leeuw is deeply inspired by Bergson's \textit{Essay sur les données immédiates de la conscience}. In \textit{Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion} (Religion in Essence and Manifestation), another classical handbook of the phenomenology of religions, Heiler devotes 11 pages to "sacred time", which he distinguishes from 'profane' or 'secular time'. According to Heiler, the very notion of 'time' is religious in nature because he finds that the word \textit{tempus} derives from the same root as \textit{templum} or \textit{tēmenos} (Heiler 1961, 150–161).

The most eminent representative of the conception of a 'sacred time' of course was Eliade.\textsuperscript{11} In Eliade's writings the idea of 'sacred time' is intimately linked to the idea of a \textit{homo religiousus}. According to Eliade, the religious human being as such has as it were a natural desire to live in 'sacred time' which is essentially a return \textit{in illo tempore}, the time of origins, of eternity, totality and duration. This is a very distinct experience of time from 'ordinary', 'profane' or 'secular' time. 'Sacred time' is heterogeneous, reversible, and it finds its most genuine expression in cyclical time and the myth of eternal recurrence — this is also the title of one of Eliade's masterpieces — while history and linear time are linked to secular time; the religious person according to Eliade is obsessed by a terror of history and a nostalgia but still reveals a deeper level of existence than its modern, secular counterpart.

Even in Eliade the impact of Bergson's \textit{Essay} is clearly noticeable. Moreover, a tendency that had already made itself felt in Hubert's essay is obvious in Eliade’s theories: the theoretical construction of 'sacred time' is to be read as a

\textsuperscript{10} On the rivalries between these schools, their shared intellectual heritage, their different points of reference and their different cultural agendas see Kippenberg 1994.

\textsuperscript{11} There are hundreds of titles one could mention in the bibliography. An obvious choice is Eliade 1986, 326-343 with sub-chapters on the heterogeneity of time, hierarchic times, periodicity, restoration of mythic time, non-periodical repetition, regeneration of time, annual repetitions of the cosmogony, contingent repetition of the cosmogony, and total regeneration. The themes mentioned here recur in almost all of Eliade’s writings on time.
cultural critique, nay, revolt against modern, industrialised reality and its impact of the daily experience of time which is — as one could fittingly say with Hubert — basically ‘quantitative’ in nature: nobody ‘has’ time and our ordinary experience of time is dominated by the pressure of clocks and — what a significant metaphor! — ‘deadlines’. The unease that most people feel with this uncomfortable reality of time, of course, gave a nearly utopian ring to these ideas. This may well be a factor for the popularity especially of Eliade’s ideas. It is well known from the history of religions that ideas on ‘different times’, which are located in the past, in the future or somewhere else were often used as cultural critiques of the present situation. Imaginations of ‘other’ times are a powerful force in religious history.\footnote{The distinction between ‘Western time’ and ‘other times’ also underlies many anthropological investigations. For a critical review see Adam 1994.}

A further offshoot of the literature on ‘sacred time’ can be found in Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Sproul, the author of the entry ‘sacred time’, only partly follows Eliade, but this does not make the article more historical in character. On the contrary, Sproul first raises some fundamental problems regarding time and subsequently tries to classify the ‘answers’ of different religions to these abstract questions in a very loose form. For example, she poses the question: what causes time? She then states: “Religions approach the question in two ways. Those that conceive time as infinite conclude that it is uncaused. On the other hand, those that think time is finite and caused go further, wondering what was before its beginning and what will be after its end” (Sproul 1987, 536). Religions are thus again basically conceived as systems of thought, and accordingly, in another section, Sproul sketches “Views of Time” in different religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Tribal religions (Sproul 1987, 538–541). Again, new religious movements and Eastern Asian religions are not discussed.

In a subsequent section Sproul tries to distinguish between religious and secular views of time (Sproul 1987, 541–542). Here she obviously follows in Eliade’s footsteps. The same is true concerning her discussion of rites and rituals. The final section, entitled “Time and the Individual”, repeats her basic idea that religions aim at relating time to eternity. She here makes a statement that might serve as a conclusion of an interreligious dialogue-session: “religions emphasize the dependence of individual, temporal lives on the eternal. Ultimately created out of timeless Being-Itself (or Not-Being-Itself), each creature is understood as perpetually sustained by its maker, and, on the occasion of a person’s transition
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from one period of life to another, religions regularly honour his or her connection to the absolute” (Sproul 1987, 543). Despite its empirical mask, I regard this as a theological statement.

'Time(s)' and 'religion(s)' after the cultural turn

The idea of a specific 'sacred time' and the contributions to the volume Religion and time obviously proceed from the assumption that 'religion' or 'the sacred' are autonomous categories, primarily intense, consisting of dense intellectual activity. In this version, the task of the history of religion is a systematisation of the results of these reflective processes about the abstract notion of 'time'. According to this methodology, the history of religions is a history of 'religious ideas' that are, at best, related to certain cultural contexts.

Contrary, or at least supplementary, to this intellectual (philosophical or theological) understanding of religion, from a historical point of view, I would understand 'religions' — now we have to switch to the plural — as multidimensional forms of social practices and organisations following a certain family-resemblance.13

If we understand 'religions' as a heuristic category conceptualising certain multidimensional forms of social practices and organisation, our primary point of reference shifts from philosophical or theological theories about time to time as a necessary social construct and as a fundamental mode of experience. From a neurophysiological point of view, this kind of experience seems to be a function of the activation of the neocortex (Achter & Kuntz & Walter 1998, 24).

The day as a temporal unit between nature and culture

Time as such is invisible and cannot be observed. But processes that involve time are an empirical reality for everybody. Here 'body' is to be taken literally since our body is marked by a complex interplay of functions that all have their

13 In that connection we have to keep in mind that the category 'religion' as an autonomous sphere of life and society is a historical product of European (religious) history. The application of 'religion' to other cultures or older periods of European history implies a eurocentric perspective. Even if — in spite of good reasons for doing so — we temporarily fail to avoid the term 'religions', we should at least try to avoid the idea, or rather illusion, of an autonomous 'religious object'.

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own sequence or rhythm. To mention just the circadian (from circa + dies) endogenous time-patterns: "At the short end of the time spectrum, there is the 1/10-second oscillation of brain waves on an electroencephalogram, the 1-second basis cardiac rhythm, the 6-second respiratory cycle, and the various sleep stages leading up to the 24-hour sleep-wake period" (Aveni 1990, 29). Empirical studies, however, have shown that the sleep-wake period is to a certain extent independent of the day-night rhythm. For some people it tends to consist of 23 hours, for others it lasts as long as 25 hours (Achter & Kuntz & Walter 1998, 15).

Thus, already on the seemingly 'natural' level of the day we come across a triple-structure. This consists of a biological endogenous pattern and two exogenous dimensions, one of these being a natural phenomenon, the revolution of the earth around the sun, and one of them being a social construction that synchronises the aforementioned two dimensions for the individuals and for society. Empirical studies, for instance of shift workers and cases of depression and schizophrenia, have emphasised the need for a successful merger of these different dimensions of endogenous and exogenous time (Achter & Kuntz & Walter 1998, 15–17). Developmental psychology, for example Piaget's famous study La construction du réel chez l'enfant (1950), has demonstrated that this synchronisation is not simply given but is achieved or constructed through complicated processes during infancy.

In different ways several religious practices intervene in the social construction of time already on this basic level. When it comes to the short end of the circadian time-spectrum, in meditation-techniques, for instance, one finds attempts to synchronise religious activities and organic time-patterns. By way of example one might refer to the hesychast monks who, while sitting in their cells, were, in exact correspondence with the rhythm of their breathing, reciting a short prayer.15

As a rule, the beginning and the end of day and night, respectively, tend to be demarcated by rituals. As points of convergence of different time-dimensions and focus for synchronisation, morning and evening twilight seem to be especially intense time-spheres for different types of religious activities. The interconnectedness of different units often has to be ritually constructed, in

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14 Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 151 refer to our bodily rhythms, the movements of clocks, and other such events as "time-defining events."

15 The problem of rhythm would merit a separate study. In my view, it belongs to the understudied key-elements of any research on time and religion. It is linked to music, dance, and experiences of trance. For rhythm and rituals see also Rappaport 1999, 227; D'Aquili & Newberg 1999, 99; Jackson 1970.
a performative way guaranteeing continuity and keeping the cosmos going. Rituals may be especially significant in that connection because they often claim to present seemingly invariant structures. In another type of ritual activity 'memory' of certain key-events or key-structures is enacted on a daily basis. Moreover, often the day as such is subdivided into different time-zones which in turn are segmented according to certain types of ritual actions. Certain rituals, for instance, may only be performed or certain prayers may only be said at certain times of the day or night, while they are prohibited at other times.

Rituals seem to be a powerful means of synchronisation. Many rituals are structured in such a way that they create patterns of simultaneity among performers or participants, for instance by making the same kind of bodily movements at exactly the same time. Rituals can create special 'tempi' of social interaction. Moreover, the performance of rituals may follow, if not create, a certain time-pattern (Rappaport 1999, 220–222)\(^6\) and the scheduled periodicity contributes to distinguishing ritual activity as more meaningful than other types of social action (Bell 1997, 167).\(^7\) In this way, 'community' is not merely represented but ritually constructed, and the participation in the simultaneously performed acts can be seen as an expression of consent (to insiders) and unity (to outsiders).

The week and calendars in religious history

Contrary to the day and in a certain respect to the year and the month, the week seems to have no link to exogenous natural processes.\(^8\) It seems to be entirely a social construct, consequently much varying in length and significance in different societies and religions. The history of the week and calendars as a whole is an interesting example of how religions deal historically with temporal structures (Rüpke 1996). However, we have to keep in mind that time-reckoning is related to the different degrees of complexity of different societies. Moreover, oral and written calendars are rather different in character.

As a rule, religions do not simply invent calendars but one finds rather an interplay of different factors. Thus, there is no 'Buddhist calendar' as such but

\(^{6}\) For an application of Rappaport's theory on the analysis of television and ritual see Thomas 1998, 459-517.

\(^{7}\) Time is also a factor in creating a hierarchy of ritual orders.

\(^{8}\) However, in chronobiology there seem to be some slight indications for the existence of a circasepten-period.
different countries dominated by Buddhism have developed calendars that integrate various Buddhist key-events and often indigenous regional traditions alien to Buddhism. Our own culture uses a calendar which represents a heterogeneous religio-cultural legacy: The seven-day week is of Mesopotamian origin, the day of rest is a Jewish legacy, the planet-week is an astrological concept which originated in the Hellenistic world, some of the names of the days and months are Roman or equivalent interpretations (for instance in Northern Europe). Nevertheless, we would call it a ‘Christian calendar’.

The dynasty of the Achaemenians which ruled over Iran and many neighbouring countries in the centuries before Alexander the Great, introduced a calendar which follows exactly the Egyptian pattern, in that it divides the year in 12 months consisting of 30 days each plus five supplementary days. This scheme later became a ‘Zoroastrian calendar’ in that every day and every month were identified with one Zoroastrian deity and the five supplementary days with one hymn. This simple scheme in practice caused severe problems since Zoroastrian priests, at least in theory, apparently strongly objected for liturgical reasons to the intercalation of single days. Instead they opted for the intercalation of whole months after roughly 120 years. This of course proved to be very difficult to realise. Therefore, it seems, the calendar was unstable and regressed over the course of the years. After Iran became a part of the Islamic caliphate, the ‘Zoroastrian’ calendar continued to be used for some centuries. However, neither the Zoroastrian nor the Islamic calendar satisfied the needs of the administration. It took many centuries until a successful new calendar was developed and spread. Moreover, there were many other calendars in use in Iranian history, often even simultaneously. In purely religious contexts, Islam and the other religions coexisting on Iranian soil did use their respective religious calendars and partly still do so. This seems to be typical for most countries where religions coexist.

‘Time’ in religious change and continuity

In spite of the different legacies apparently inherent in many calendars, certain aspects of time-reckoning play a symbolic role in interreligious relationships. Sure 9:36-37 seems to indicate that questions of calendar were an early issue of polemics of Mohammed against what he calls “the people of the unbelievers”. During the French Revolution, the introduction of a ‘rational’,
consequently decimally designed calendar with new names for the day and the month and new festivals was an import strategy to create a new ‘civil’ identity, a ‘new human being’, a ‘new society’ and a ‘new time’ (Meinzer 1992). To a certain extent, changing the calendar reinforced the project of de-Christianisation in Revolutionary France. The decimally calendar, however, which had been in use since 1783 was abolished in 1805. In that respect, time was much more symbolically ‘loaded’ than space, since the metric system introduced by the Revolutionary Government at roughly the same time is nowadays almost universally used. In 19th Century France and during the 20th Century in the Soviet Union, there were some attempts to reintroduce the revolutionary calendar or to introduce related new calendars. However, all these attempts were ultimately bound to fail.

It should, however, be noted that the attempted introduction of new calendars often went hand in hand with the invention of new sets of rituals. The case of the Bahai religion might serve to illustrate that the formation of a ‘new’ religion may be associated with the creation of a new calendar and new ritual practices which are related in different ways to that calendar.

Moreover, the timing of festivals can be used as a strategy to create religious continuity and a strategy to dissociate a new religious formation from the past. Not only in that respect does the construction of religious time resemble the religious construction of space. One is reminded of continuity in the location of cultic sites, but also of attempts to consciously introduce new cultic places, sometimes opposite or next to the places used by the competitors. Participating in a festival of a different religion than one’s own can have religious motives — one also profits from the blessings — or it can be a symbol of an attitude of respect or ecumenism. On the other hand, disturbing special time-segments of other religions is a common means of interreligious provocation.

‘Special times’, that is times that in certain ways transcend ordinary time, are of course an important means of constructing religious identity. Festivals are an obvious case in point. For instance, Passover was initially shared by the ‘Jews’ and the ‘Christians’. In a way one could argue that Christians developed a separate identity when ‘Passover’ definitely became ‘Easter’ in that it’s timing was shifted. Subsequently the date of Easter played a certain role in the separation of the Greek, Irish and Roman Churches.

More than circumcision, a common Semitic practice, the Sabbath as a day

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19 For the Aztec it has been remarked: “Space equalled time”, see Read 1998, 28.
20 For the concept of “time out of time”, see Rappaport 1999, 216-220.
of rest became an important way for Jews to separate themselves from non-Jews from the time of the exile. In post-exile times the Sabbath increasingly played the role of a day devoted to service or cult. In Christianity the development went in the opposite direction. While the Sunday was first known as the "day of the lord" when the key-ritual was performed at the edge of the day, after Constantine it became an official day of rest. The relationship of Sunday and Sabbath is, not least, one of concurrence and inversion (Klinghardt 1991).

The same is true of the Islamic Friday. To take an example from a different context: during the colonial period, in view of the Muslim population, the British colonial power in Western Africa, introduced Friday as a day of rest. However, "the clergy of Northern Nigeria referred to the legal maxim, 'It is blameworthy to abstain from work on Friday in imitation of Christians and Jews', and resisted its introduction. Government offices therefore take Sunday off and their clerks are released on Friday merely in time to spruce themselves up to attend prayer which anyway is held late in the afternoon" (Trimingham 1959, 73).

Time-budgeting

This African case raises another problem: the budgeting of time in religions. How much and which times do different members of religions devote to what kind of religious activities? Different strategies of time-budgeting distinguish or construct different levels of professionalisation and specialisation. Professional priests, theologians, monks and lay-people, for instance, devote different amounts of time to different types of religious activities. Moreover, in many societies gender seems to correspond to different religious time-budgets. The high frequency of ritual performance, for instance in Judaism, corresponds to and strengthens their exclusive religious identity.21

'Modernisation' and 'secularisation' are key-words indicating (supposed) changes in religious time-budgets in modern history. Migration often leads to changes in the organisation of religious time. To give another set of examples from modern diasporas: Ismailis who migrated from East Africa to Canada shifted their main weekly community-ritual from Friday-midday to Friday-night in order to accommodate Canadian work schedules. For Canadian Sunni Muslims the fact that the faithful are not called to prayer from a minaret and

21 For orthodox Jews see Rappaport 1999, 204. A similar point could be made with regard to 'orthodox' Zoroastrians in India.
that working-life does not provide time for the performance of daily-prayers requires changes in religious behaviour. Of course, the observance of Ramadan in the Nordic summer creates all sorts of difficulties — and makes people invent strategies to avoid them (Coward 1998, 789, 791).

One of the effects of ‘modernisation’ was the invention of ‘leisure-time’, a specific time-budget which is different from ‘working hours’. Accordingly, in the modern age religion to a certain extent became a leisure-time affair, and as such it has to compete with other forms of leisure-time activities (such as e.g. sports). In creating a new form of religious demand, this change influenced the structure of the religious market, and it may be responsible for some of the new features we are observing in some recent developments in religious history.

Controlling and constructing time

The construction of time is closely linked to the control of time. Many religions offer powerful means to investigate or even to control the future and to create links to the past, for instance through divination-rituals and ancestor-cults. These mechanisms are obviously significant not only for individuals or families, but not least for what we might call the sphere of politics. Different parts of organisms, nature, life and society operate with or within different time-schemes. The same is of course true for that cluster of phenomena that we usually classify as religions: religions never have only one specific conception of time, not even on the purely intellectual level (see above § 1.b). Religions rather construct time — and do so on different levels. These different levels are not necessarily hierarchically connected.

By way of example, one could refer to “the cyclical oscillation of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness” (Fuller 1992, 242) that is characteristic of the experience of time and timing in popular religion in India. Rites of passage construct life-time or a different time-sphere in life and in most of the so-called world-religions one finds techniques of experiencing a universal non-temporal contemporaneity or rather simultaneousness (usually in the context of ‘mysticism’). Exstatic experiences or rituals make other dimensions of ‘time’ present. Finally, cosmogonic and eschatological myths, millenarism or apocalypticism structure cosmic time and create a wider horizon consisting of different temporal units.

22 For examples see von Brück 1995; Böwering 1998.
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