Religious Studies in Germany: Institutional Frameworks and Constraints

ABSTRACT
In Germany the distinction between theology and *Religionswissenschaft* remains firmly in place. This article examines the institutional context of both disciplines. A related development is the recent creation of chairs and programs of Islamic theology. While Christian theology is shielded by constitutional and legal privileges and is far bigger than *Religionswissenschaft*, the latter has benefited from new initiatives in educational policy. Successful new centers and projects were established, the most prominent of which focus on topics at the intersection with sociology. This growth, however, risks not being sustainable, given some peculiarities of the German academic system, in particular its hierarchical, professor-focused structure. The article also discusses the international dimension of German *Religionswissenschaft*.

Religion belongs to a range of subjects (such as art, cognition, health, law, media, mythology, politics, space, truth, etc.) that are studied by a variety of academic disciplines. In some cases, one focal discipline claims main responsibility for a specific subject, which is also studied within other disciplines. For example, in addition to faculties of law, law is studied by other disciplines; consider established sub-disciplines like anthropology of law, philosophy of law, and sociology of law. Contrary to most other subjects, however, there are two academic disciplines that claim disciplinary authority on religion: theology and *Religionswissenschaft*. In addition, there are several disciplines claiming main expertise on specific religions (Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, different area studies, etc.).

Contrary to the United Kingdom, where TRS (Theology and Religious Studies) has become a common label, at least on an administrative or classificatory level (see Knott, this issue), the distinctions between theology and *Religionswissenschaft* have for the most part remained firmly in place and clearly visible in Germany. While the epistemological distinctions between the two disciplines are open to debate, in Germany they operate on clearly distinct institutional premises because theology continues to enjoy certain legal privileges that to some extent shield it from the ordinary mechanisms of disciplinary competition. To begin with, historically faculties (divisions) of theology were integral parts of the traditional and the modern German university models. Up to this day, in one form or the other, theology is taught at some 56 German universities; it is represented at most larger universities, even at those in Eastern Germany and at those founded since the 1960s. In addition, there are several ecclesiastical universities or colleges (‘Hochschule’), colleges of education (‘Pädagogische Fachschule’) and polytechnics (‘Fachhochschule’) where theology is taught. *Religionswissenschaft*, on the other hand, is taught at around 19 to 28 German universities, depending on how one defines *Religionswissenschaft*. Even though this figure seems low when compared to theology, back in the 1970s the number was less than 10 universities.

The confessional matrix
The first university to be established without a faculty of theology was the University of Frankfurt, founded in 1914 by wealthy citizens rather than by the government. In pre-Nazi times, several prominent Jewish intellectuals taught at this university, among them Max Buber, Karl Mannheim, and Paul Tillich. In 1933, a third of the teaching staff lost their positions. However, in 1974 theology was established at the University of Frankfurt. Nowadays, the Goethe-University Frankfurt even has two entire *Fachbereiche* (faculties or departments) of theology: ‘Evangelische Theologie’ and ‘Katholische Theologie’, each comprising eight or nine chairs respectively, including one in *Religionswissenschaft* (in the Protestant section) and one in *Vergleichende Religionswissenschaften* (in the Catholic section). The Frankfurt case exemplifies some general points about the German institutional situation.

Firstly, theology in Germany always comes in the confessional mode. In other words: in the German institutional context there is no theology as such, 2

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2 These figures and much information used in this article is taken from the 'Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen' published by the Wissenschaftsrat (Council of Science of Humanities), an advisory body to the German federal government and state governments, in 2010. This report lists 28 universities. If one interprets *Religionswissenschaft* in a stricter sense, i.e., if one disregards chairs at the intersection with theology, the number is less than 20; see the list published on the website of the German association for the study of religion: https://www.dvww.uni-hannover.de/institute0.html, accessed December 23, 2016.

3 Evangelisch is not to be confused with 'evangelical'; evangelisch is a shorthand for Protestant, be it Lutheran or Reformed.
but there is Protestant (*Evangelische*) Theology and Catholic Theology. Theologians do not even have a common scholarly association. While the name ‘Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie’ could seem to be such an organization because its name does not allude to a confessional identity and its bylaws do not mention any kind of confessional identity, all members of the executive committee are Protestant theologians, and the list of affiliated faculties only includes faculties of Protestant theology. Moreover, each confessional variety has its separate representative association: there is the ‘Evangelisch-theologische Fakultätenstag’\(^5\) and the ‘Katholisch-Theologische Fakultätenstag’.\(^6\) There are some major universities that have two full faculties – i.e., one of Catholic and one of Protestant theology.

Secondly, in both confessional varieties theology is internally differentiated into different subject areas. In other words: even if one studies Protestant or Catholic theology, from the graduate level onwards one specializes in one specific subject area. These vary somewhat but there is something like a core of theological sub-disciplines that are practiced at most faculties, namely: church history (typically sub-divided by historical period), biblical studies (always sub-divided in Old and New Testament), systematic theology (always including dogmatics and ethics), and practical theology (homenetics, liturgical studies, pedagogy of religion, pastoral theology). These major sub-disciplines have a distinct flavor in Catholic and Protestant contexts; this is most pronounced in dogmatics, of course, but also perceivable in other sub-disciplines. Moreover, each of these subject areas has its own specialized disciplinary infrastructure such as journals, handbooks, conferences, etc. This contrasts with *Religionswissenschaft*, which does not have any generally recognized set of sub-disciplines or even core areas; the subject can look very different at different universities. In addition to these theological core areas there is a series of sub-disciplines that are taught at divisions of theology at some or several universities, depending on the ambitions, functions and confessional framework of the respective units: ecclesiastical law and fundamental theology, mission studies, philosophy of religion and Religiouswissenschaft. Compared to theologians, scholars of religion’s (*Religionswissenschaftler*) have to be generalists. Whereas a theologian teaches one theological sub-discipline, for example church history, a *Religionswissenschaftler* typically has to represent this discipline in its entirety. Correspondingly, there usually are only one to maximum three chairs in *Religionswissenschaft* at any one university.

Thirdly, in this institutional matrix, *Religionswissenschaft* can appear as a sub-discipline of confessional theology. While this clashes with the common self-understanding of *Religionswissenschaft*, which insists on independence from theology (and any other discipline for that matter), roughly half of all its chairs in Germany are in fact placed in faculties of theology, where *Religionswissenschaft* represents just one chair or section among many. In this context *Religionswissenschaft* is typically expected to cover non-Christian varieties of religion. In this setting, the existence of these positions is fragile to the extent that *Religionswissenschaft* does not constitute a core area of theology. Theology is traditionally well conceivable without students taking courses in *Religionswissenschaft*, while it would be difficult to see students graduate in theology unless they were taught biblical studies, dogmatics, or church history. Should faculties of theology for one reason or the other decide to discontinue teaching of *Religionswissenschaft* this latter subject would be thrown into crisis. In some theological contexts, for example within the ‘Gesellschaft für wissenschaftliche Theologie’, *Religionswissenschaft* is often studied in conjunction with ‘intercultural theology’, a theological sub-discipline encompassing approaches such as interfaith or comparative theology formerly known as mission studies (*Missionswissenschaft* or Missionskunde). On the Catholic confessional side, this trajectory is reflected in one of the oldest extant journals of religious studies in Germany, the *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft* (ZMR), published since 1911. These days, however, there are relatively few scholars from *Religionswissenschaft* publishing in this journal.

**Legal privileges of theology**

The exceptional representation of theology at German universities has not only historical, but also legal reasons and ramifications.\(^7\) This is a legacy from the transition from the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) to the Weimar Republic, when it was stipulated that the continued existence of faculties of theology at the universities should be safeguarded. This rule was continued when the Federal Republic was founded in 1949. The common understanding of the constitution is that there should be cooperation between the state and the churches in issues of mutual concern (*res mixtae*), which includes the teaching of Christian theology at state universities insofar as university professors are

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\(^4\) Additionally, there are some chairs or departments of Orthodox Theology or Old Catholic Theology.


employed by the state, while their teaching falls into the discursive realm of the churches. The religious neutrality of the state does not allow the state to establish confessional faculties or programs without the consent of the concerned religious groups.\(^8\) The state is committed to the preservation of theology as a subject taught at German universities, but since the different federal states (Bundesländer) are in charge of education the details are negotiated between them and the (regional) churches (or the Vatican). This preservation of theology comes in two main varieties: (a) as a guarantee to establish specific chairs or to safeguard specific teaching areas; (b) as the guarantee to have separate faculties of theology. The latter is the case with four faculties of Catholic theology and twelve faculties of Protestant theology. This means that the universities to which some of these agreements apply cannot unilaterally disband the teaching of theology. A similar protection does not exist for Religionswissenschaft or any other subject. This legal protection does not exclude the temporary suspension of programs nor a reduction in staff, as long as the core areas remain covered.

The legal privileges of theology extend to the process of hiring professors. The churches are given a voice in the process of appointment by having a right to reject appointees; in the Catholic case the bishop has to express his nihil obstat. This rejection must not be based on academic reasons, which is part of the scholarly assessment and falls outside of the domain of the church, but only on matters of moral conduct or faith and orthodoxy. As is well known from some prominent cases — among them Hans Küng on the Catholic side and Gerd Lüdemann on the Protestant side —, this right of rejection can also be exercised on senior professors many years after their appointments. In several cases, the opposition of the church has resulted in the transfers of the professors in question to chairs outside the core programs. In some cases in the past, Religionswissenschaft has benefited from such replacements in that new positions in Religionswissenschaft have been created for former theologians, but these chairs were discontinued once the former theologian went into retirement. The influence of the churches on the appointment of candidates adversely and severely affects Religionswissenschaft. Given that around half of the positions in Religionswissenschaft at German universities are located within faculties of theology, academically qualified persons may not even be in a position to apply for advertised positions if they do not have the necessary confessional credentials or their applications can be dismissed without further argument. It has even happened that a colleague who was selected could not be appointed due to objections by the relevant church authority. These rules and practices exclude a major part of younger scholars from prospective positions, even when they are not expected to teach courses in theological subjects. This situation can be tragic for scholars in need of a position, whose candidacy is excluded by circumstances other than their academic qualifications, and it is tragic for Religionswissenschaft as an academic community because its future development is influenced and hampered by non-academic criteria — and criteria that fundamentally violate its academic identity as a non-confessional discipline. Compared to theological discourse in other countries — in particular the USA — the confessional framework of theology in Germany may also turn out to be a limiting factor for its development, especially for systematic theology. Approaches like ecumenical, interreligious, interfaith, pluralistic, or comparative theology tend to be championed by theologians working in Switzerland — where the confessional restrictions are less strong — or in fringe-structures within faculties of Protestant theology nominally linked to Religionswissenschaft such as sub-departments of ‘Religionswissenschaft and intercultural theology’ (e.g. at Heidelberg and Munster) or the ‘Institute for Ecumenical and Interreligious Research’, which served as a refuge for Hans Küng when his teaching credentials were revoked by the Vatican.

The historical, constitutional-legal, and educational supremacy of (confessional) theology vis-à-vis Religionswissenschaft is clearly reflected in the number of academic positions at German universities. In 2007, Catholic and Protestant faculties of theology employed round 350 professors each, while the number for Religionswissenschaft (interpreted in a broad sense) was 32. Compared to 1995 that was a decrease of 12 per cent for Protestant theology and 20 per cent for Catholic theology, while the number of professors in Religionswissenschaft had increased by 78 per cent. The rapid growth of Religionswissenschaft in recent decades notwithstanding, theology and Religionswissenschaft remain unequal partners; each confessional theology is more than ten times stronger than Religionswissenschaft in total. There are far more chairs in Old Testament studies than in Religionswissenschaft. This numerical supremacy of theology is also, albeit to a significantly lesser extent, reflected in the number of students: in 2007, almost 22,000 students were enrolled in Protestant theology programs and some 20,500 in Catholic theology, while the corresponding number for Religionswissenschaft was some 4,300. However, contrary to theology, the number of students in Religionswissenschaft had risen significantly during the previous ten years (just like the number of professors).

\(^8\) The modalities of state-church interfaces at faculties of theology are regulated by concordats or contracts between the churches and the state.
Priesthood and school education

Contrary to Religionswissenschaft, theology caters to specific target groups. To begin with, applying to become a fully ordained pastor or priest in the Catholic or one of the main Protestant churches requires a professional degree in the relevant branch of confessional theology. Like law and medicine - degrees giving entry into a group of professions -, in Germany theology resisted the introduction of programs following the parameters of the Bologna reforms, i.e. the division of studies into two degrees, namely bachelor and master rather than one degree such as the Diplom or the Magister.9 Even though not all students of theology intend to become religious professionals, the recruitment of such students provides theology with special privileges and legitimacy. Churches also provide a host of job opportunities beyond priesthood.

In addition, with some minor exceptions - mainly Protestant Berlin -, teachers of religion at public schools require a degree in (confessional) theology. This is the result of the stipulation made by the German constitutional law (Grundgesetz, § 7,3) that the teaching of religion at public schools is to be held in accordance with the principles of the religious communities (Religionsgemeinschaften), which first of all refers to the confessional churches. In practice, this principle results in the division of the student body along confessional or religious lines: Catholic and Protestant children - for not to speak of Jewish, Muslim, others or 'nones' - who are part of the same group when it comes to history, mathematics, German or foreign languages are assigned to sub-groups when it comes to religious instruction. Up to the age of 14 (in Bavaria: 18), parents can ask for their children to be exempted from religious instruction; from the age of 14 (Bavaria: 18) onwards students can themselves take this decision. However, it is not possible for a student belonging to a specific religious group or church to attend religious education held according to the principles of another religious community. In other words, in German public schools of almost all federal states religion is a matter of de facto division, not of de facto integration. The main exception from this rule is Hamburg, where all students at public schools have to attend the same kind of religious education, which is based on Protestantism with an 'interreligious' emphasis. Contrary to Hamburg and the standard model outlined above, in some federal states such as Brandenburg, Bremen and Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony), which have somewhat divergent rules, Religionswissenschaft plays a modest role in teacher education. In Berlin, Jewish religious education is offered at public schools as well as 'Lebenskundelehrunterricht' ('instruction in

9 For Catholic theology see the collection of relevant documents by H. Hallermann, Katholische Theologie im Bologna-Prozess: Gesetze, Dokumente, Berichte, Paderborn etc. 2011.

knowledge of life'), a secular worldview subject designed by the Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands (Germany's Humanist Union). Berlin is an exceptional case also because a public referendum was held there on the future design of school religious education in 2009. However, the majority of voters (by a small voter turnout) opted to maintain the status quo.

The emergence of Islamic theology

The increase of religious plurality as a result of migration and an increased freedom of choice among citizens - who no longer automatically enroll or remain in their inherited Christian confession - could have played into the hands of Religionswissenschaft, where students can study and professors teach religion without confessional restraints. Yet, since the constitutional and legal framework outlined above has remained intact, German educational policy, rather than challenging the confessional model seeks to deal with increased pluralism by extending it to other religions, primarily to Islam. First initiatives to introduce Islamic theology or Islamic studies beyond the established historical and philological approaches (a.k.a. 'Islamwissenschaft' or 'Orientalistik') started around the turn of the century; in 2004, a chair for 'Religion des Islam' was established at the university of Munster, with the expectation that the chair would contribute to the training of teachers of Islamic religion at public schools. However, since the first holder of that chair, Sven Kalisch (b. 1966 in Hamburg), who had converted to Islam at the age of 15, came to express views that were considered controversial he lost support among Muslim advisory organizations and his chair was excluded from the teacher training programme. Because of his alleged withdrawal from proper Islam and allegations of wrongdoing, Kalisch was transferred from the unit of religious studies to philology. His successor, Mouhanad Khorchide (b. 1971 in Beirut), who is professor of Islamic pedagogy of religion, has been confronted with similar hostilities, but the tensions now seem to have eased somewhat. Based on recommendations made by the Wissenschaftsrat (Council of Science of Humanities) in 2011, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research established centers of Islamic theology at five German universities. This is an unusual initiative as educational policy is in Germany largely decided on the level of the single federal states and because this step risked violating the principle of non-establishment of confessional programs. This step clearly indicated the political importance the government assigned to this initiative; apparently the more or less explicit political agenda was to encourage the societal integration of Muslims in Germany, to provide a theological alternative to violent-prone islamism and jihadism, and to stimulate the emergence of an understanding of religion as an 'enlightened' or 'modern' religion.
Similar to the training of priests at faculties of theology, by establishing Islamic theology the state wants to provide an educational basis for a future generation of imams, which so far have mainly been trained abroad and beyond the control of German academic discourses. Some may hope while others may fear that imams trained at German universities would serve to domesticate Islam and create a version of Islam rooted in German ideas of democracy, human rights, etc. However, so far it seems that this amounts to wishful thinking, as mosques in Germany have not shown any desire to hire graduates of Islamic theology, nor do the students of Islamic theology aim at becoming imams, which is not a very prestigious job. After a positive evaluation of these five centers -- the evaluation reports however have not been made public -- their funding has recently been extended for another period of five years. The hasty start-up of these programs and centers has predictably resulted in some problems, not the least that of finding suitable professors, who are now facing the challenge of setting up an entire new field -- Islamic (practical) theology similar to the parameters provided by Christian theology for use at German educational institutes and benefiting German society -- basically from scratch.

The confessional (or insider-religionist) approach to religious studies has thereby been continued and even strengthened. In the case of Islam, however, this confessional model operates on the level of external differentiation only -- Islam is treated as a confession among others -- but ignores the internal confessional differentiation in Islam; (so far) there are no divisions of, say, Sunni, Shia, Alevite, or Alawite theology at German universities. A potentially new discursive space for Islam and a new academic discipline are emerging, with its own journal, the Zeitschrift für Islamische Studien (the word theology is avoided here) and a scholarly association, the 'Deutsche Gesellschaft für Islamisch-Theologische Studien'.

Seeking excellence and strengthening the humanities: new research centres

In addition to the emergence of Islamic theology, new educational policies have moved the field forward. On the heels of the implementation of the so-called Bologna-reform, in 2005 the federal government in cooperation with the state governments has started the so-called 'Exzellenzinitiative' ('Initiative of Excellence') aiming at making the German research landscape more competitive, to help some universities to achieve international excellence and to increase the visibility of achievements of German academia. Funding was administrated by the national research organization, the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). This massive program comprised three main funding lines: (a) the establishment of some 40 graduate schools, (b) some 30 so-called 'clusters of excellence' ('Exzellenzcluster') to promote top-level research and (c) the selection of so-called 'Universities of Excellence' ready to create new institutional strategies to reestablish their status as top-universities (a kind of German micro Ivy league). The graduate schools and the clusters of excellence were devised as cross-disciplinary initiatives. Among the 17 graduate schools in the humanities and social sciences, several are area-studies based schools that also sponsor some individual dissertation projects dealing with religion. The one that comes closest to an overarching focus on religion is the 'Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies', which is based on Oriental and Islamic studies but does not actively involve theology and Religionswissenschaft. Among the six clusters of excellence in the humanities and social sciences funded for the period 2007 to 2017, two involve theology and Religionswissenschaft ('Asia and Europe in a Global Context' at Heidelberg, and 'Topoi: The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations' at Berlin), while one cluster has been directly focusing on religion ('Religion and Politics in Pre-Modern and Modern Cultures' at Munster University), where the sociologist of religion Detlef Pollock (b. 1955), who also holds a degree in theology, serves as the speaker. Pollock, who grew up in the former German Democratic Republic and has mainly published on the secularization debate, is professor of sociology of religion. The cluster involves a broad range of academic disciplines including theology and Religionswissenschaft, but the latter does not seem to play a prominent role in the cluster.

The situation of religious studies has also gained an increased dynamics by massive investments into the future of the humanities. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research has in 2008 established so-called 'Käte Hamburger Centres'. These are large research centers including national and international research fellows grouped around one outstanding scholar who will be largely released from teaching and other university duties. Ten such centers have been funded so far, among them one on 'Fate, Freedom and Prognostication:


11 There is one more chair in sociology of religion at Leipzig University (in the faculty of [Protestant] theology). At Bayreuth university, there is a chair for 'Kultur- und Religionssoziologie'. There are no chairs of anthropology of religion at German universities, nor any chairs of psychology of religion, but there are anthropologists studying religion and theologians working on psychology of religion.
Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe’ at Erlangen-Nürnberg, which also has a series of projects dealing with religion, but does not involve Religionswissenschaft as an academic discipline. Religionswissenschaft is the disciplinary and institutional core of another centre, on ‘Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe’, which in the period from 2008 to 2016 has had some hundred research fellows from around the world spending research time in Bochum. Fellows come from a broad spectrum of academic disciplines, including Protestant and Catholic theologies. The centre is chaired by Volkhard Krech (b. 1962), whose main publications are in the sociology of religion; his PhD is in sociology, but he also studied philosophy, Religionswissenschaft and theology. Krech has been professor of Religionswissenschaft at Bochum university since 2004. While the centres are meant to support a single outstanding scholar, Krech has used his position and influence to create an institutionally sustainable academic program in Religionswissenschaft beyond the centre. A series of new professorships have been created in areas that connect the religious histories of Europe and Asia, such as Central Asia (Carmen Meinert), West Asian religions, mainly Zoroastrianism (Kianoosh Rezania), but also Jewish religion (Alexandra Cuffel), the ancient Near East (Rosel Pientka-Hintz), South Asia (Jessie Pons), and East Asia (Jörg Plasser). Almost all of the scholars appointed have been fellows at the centre earlier, which has been fruitful for recruitment. Yet, none of these scholars was originally trained in Religionswissenschaft. Previously, Religionswissenschaft was situated in Bochum in the division of Protestant theology, but due to recurrent conflicts it has now become an independent institution that operates outside of the boundaries of faculties (divisions). In addition to the ‘Käte Hamburger center’ Krech has obtained several other national and international grants and projects. Two of the recently appointed scholars have in the meanwhile received major grants from the European Research Council (ERC), one on ‘Eastern Jews and Christians in Interaction and Exchange in the Islamic World and Beyond’ (Cuffel) and one on Dynamics in Buddhist Networks in Eastern Central Asia, 6th–14th Centuries’ (Meinert).

Another initiative to support the humanities was launched by the German Research Foundation (‘Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft’) in the form of Humanities Centres for Advanced Studies (‘Kolleg-Forschergruppen’). Similarly to the Käte Hamburger Centres, these centers not only allow for, but require a fellowship program to invite national and international research fellows to collaborate in various research projects, which should be chaired by leading scholars. In the first phase of this new initiative one centre obtained funding, where Religionswissenschaft plays a major role: ‘Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective’, at Erfurt University’s Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies. During the first years, the group working on individualization was codirected by the sociologist Hans Joas (b. 1948), who also teaches at Chicago University, and Jörg Rüpke (b. 1962), one of the most well-known and prolific historians of Roman religion in the world. Since the second funding period, when Joas had left Erfurt, the historian of ideas Martin Mulswol (b. 1959) joined Rüpke. The ambitions of Erfurt to establish itself as a major centre for the study of religion were also manifest in organizing the IAHR world conference in 2015, the first one to take place in Germany since 1960 (Marburg). Like in Bochum, the group on individualization is embedded in a network of other grants and initiatives and, again like in Bochum, the existence of this mega-project has resulted in an extension of the permanent staff. At the Max Weber Center a professorship for Indian religious history has been created. Like in Bochum, an outsider was called; the chair holder, Martin Fuchs (b. 1950), is a senior anthropologist cum sociologist. Like in Bochum the group-project on individualization is part of a network of major and minor grants, including an ERC grant (‘Living Ancient Religion’). In 2016 a second religion-related Kolleg-Forscherguppe (Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies) obtained funding: ‘Multiple Secularities – beyond the West, beyond Modernities’, at Leipzig university. This centre is co-chaired by the sociologist Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (b. 1957) and the Religionswissenschaftler Christoph Kleine (b. 1962), who has made his name as a historian of Japanese religions. The projects on individualization and on secularities – i.e., the shifting boundaries of the religious field – take as their starting-points an apparent characteristic of Western modernity and confront this with non-Western cultures or earlier periods of Western history. Moreover, both projects have emerged out of a cooperation of Religionswissenschaft with sociology. The latter seems to provide the big questions and the vocabulary that open a discursive space for scholars of religion to mobilize their historical and cross-cultural expertise. (In the case of the Käte Hamburger Centre at Bochum, the director embodies the combination of sociology and Religionswissenschaft in his own academic persona.)

International visibility
The collaboration with sociology has been rewarding in part because German sociology keeps a high international standard and visibility. The same can be

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said for branches of German theology, whereas German Religionswissenschaft has had less of an international reception, in part also because of language barriers and because many works are published with publishers that have a national outreach only. (By comparison, Dutch religious studies is more prone to the use of English in teaching and writing, and the Dutch publisher Brill serves as an effective link to an international audience. British scholars publishing with good publishers see their work spread internationally right away.) Moreover, for many years book series in Religionswissenschaft were published with relatively small-scale publishers, thereby supporting the perception of the discipline being a niche enterprise. Even the Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft, the journal since 1993 published by the German Association for Religionswissenschaft (DVRW), the national member organization of the IAHR and EASR, has for the first twenty years of its existence been published by Diagonal-Verlag, a tiny publishing house run by two former Religionswissenschaft graduates from Marburg. While Diagonal had the merit of providing publication outlets for scholars in the study of religions, especially younger ones, the publisher has never really expanded beyond the limited group of participants in the disciplinary discourse. This situation has been changing slowly. Since 2012, the Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft is published by de Gruyter, which is a good starting point to obtain an international outreach and reputation (some of its articles are in English). So far, however, the journal only publishes two issues a year. In 2011 Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, one of the oldest and most renowned publishers in Germany, has started a high-profile, bi-lingual book series (‘Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft’), which so far has published some ten volumes.

In the Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft Oliver Freiberger, now one of the editors of this journal (together with Christoph Kleine), published an article in which he diagnoses the low international impact of German scholars of religion. According to Freiberger this has to do with an increasing attention paid by German Religionswissenschaft to religion in contemporary Europe. I am not convinced. To begin with, while there certainly has been an increase in studies of contemporary Europe in German Religionswissenschaft there still is a solid research tradition in non-Western and pre-modern religion. The total amount of research on these topics, as I can see, has not diminished, even though its relative size of the growing cake has. All the major grant-funded centres mentioned above either have a clear historical or a cross-cultural perspective. Moreover, the increasing attention paid to modern Europe has probably greatly contributed to making the subject more attractive to students; there might be not only a correlation but also a causal relation between this shift of focus and the massive increase in student numbers that German Religionswissenschaft has seen and benefited from.

In addition to sociological theories, in the past decade poststructuralist, postcolonial and other ‘critical’ approaches have become more popular in Germany (even though not broadly accepted). A new approach called ‘aesthetics of religion’, i.e., the study of religions in their relation to the human senses, has been developed in Germany since the late 1980s. This approach has been further developed by a working group of the German association for the study of religion. Similar topics have been approached by Anglophone scholars much later, apparently unaware of the existence of a prior body of literature in German.

German Religionswissenschaft has a vibrant young generation of scholars. Students arrange annual national conferences that take place at a different university every year. The national association (DVRW) has an active working group and for scholars from the Master’s to the pre-professorial levels. There even is a peer-reviewed open access journal run by young scholars: Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft (http://zjr.revues.org/). Strengthened by the new graduate schools and centers, Germany keeps on producing many more PhDs and postdocs than can ever hope to secure a permanent position at a German university. In part this is a function of the way the German academic system is set up: external funding is key to academic success and most of the funding is not spent on creating research time for full-time professors but goes into hiring PhD-students and postdocs, irrespective of the realistic career prospects of these scholars. The growth of research does not go along with the development of a sustainable infrastructure for future generations of academics.

Austria and Switzerland, which are not dealt with in this article, are part of the German-speaking discursive landscape in religious studies. There is also transnational academic labor migration. In German-speaking Switzerland at present eight out of nine full-time professorships in Religionswissenschaft are held by Germans, while two Swiss colleagues hold chairs in Germany. For Austria, the rate of transnational labor migration is lower: one German has a position in Austria, and one Austrian in Germany. Other non-native Germans holding chairs in Religionswissenschaft include one native Greek and one American. By comparison, there are many more German scholars who have obtained permanent positions abroad (including the present writer). A

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prominent example is Kocku von Stuckrad (b. 1966), at Groningen (the Netherlands), who has done much to translate German academic *Religionswissenschaft* into the Anglophone world, be it in his research, which owes much to German scholars/scholarship, and by translating a German work of reference into English (the Brill Dictionary of Religion).

**Institutional constraints: appointments and hierarchy**

In Germany, appointments are made on the institutional level of the faculty (division). For theology this means that recruitment is an internal affair, but that an appointment in, say, New Testament studies, also needs the approval of the professors representing other branches of theology, in so far as they are represented on the committee. For *Religionswissenschaft* the situation is very different. Appointment committees tend to have four to eight members, but since there typically are only one to three chairs of *Religionswissenschaft* at any single university, this means that representatives of *Religionswissenschaft* are always a minority in these committees, even when colleagues from other universities are invited to be part of the committees. As a result, not necessarily those candidates that have the strongest academic profile within *Religionswissenschaft* will make the race, but those that appeal to a broader range of disciplines.

The German academic system remains a hierarchical one, focused on the chair/professor. Traditionally, a German chair/professor has professional academic assistants (often at a post-doctoral level). While some attempts have been made to change this – mainly by introducing the category of junior-professorships – the concept of assistant/associate professor (or lecturers/readers) has no counterpart in Germany. Research associates or assistants (‘wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter’) are subordinate to their respective professor. There is, in Germany, the concept of the ‘Mittelbau’ (non-professorial staff, literally ‘central block’). At present only ten per cent of positions in this category in *Religionswissenschaft* are permanent; 90 per cent try to make a living on short-term contracts of mainly up to three years. Moreover, only around a third of these positions are full-time.\(^{15}\) Traditionally, to become a professor requires the ‘Habilitation’, a post-doctoral degree conveying the formal *venia legendi* (i.e., the permission to teach independently at all levels of the curriculum, including the graduate levels). Even though this degree is no longer formally required – i.e., ‘equivalent’ qualifications are permissible – a
