Scholarship on Religious Experiences in the Age of Hate
From Heinrich Mann "Der Haß" to Pete Hegseth "Great Vengeance and Furious Anger"

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A1//

A quarter century ago I dedicated myself, together with many dozens of experts, to a volume that sought to take stock of the "historical-religious scholarship" of the twentieth century. That complex research produced two results which, with the passage of time, I sometimes fear deserve either a funeral eulogy or a one-way pass to the Museum of Wasted Efforts:

- The first result was objective and showed *in corpore vili* that it was possible to break out of the paradigm according to which there is one object (religion, religions) and two approaches. One approach starts from a phobia of bias, and therefore strives to achieve scientific objectivity (or critical – sic!) through the adoption of methodological extrinsicism and the rigorous exclusion of every dimension having to do with depths that cannot be sounded because they reside in the inviolable temple of consciousness (faith, for instance) and in the adoption of belief. The other approach starts from the conviction that reflection can only be non-extrinsic within an a priori "believing" paradigm (leaving it to each person to diversify their own adherence according to schemes that always move within the broad spectrum running from the revival of liberal theology to updated systematic logics): this is the approach of those who believe that non-extrinsic reflection is only possible if it is bound to a truth-claim fixed by authority, and who insist on calling this operation "theology," as though theology had never constituted itself as a science — marking a deep fracture between East and West, while at the same time opening the door to historicity.

What that work sought to illuminate — and what later found a more refined formulation in the founding of the European Academy of Religion — is that i) there are disciplines ii) with their own specific epistemological charters iii) that are traversed by, or iv) traverse, religious experience and v) the conceptions that drive it, vi) leaving to each body of knowledge the responsibility of appraising, motivating, and articulating its own epistemic questions.

- The second result was to explain what was happening on the public stage: while historical-religious scholarship, like every other scientific discipline, was working by way of specializations, sectorial

divisions, and ever finer, ever smaller niche expertises, other forces outside the circuits of knowledge were claiming for themselves the right to synthesis — in a deeply ambiguous dialogue with politics, because it allowed power ambitions to exploit the religious dimension in a highly effective and, ante litteram, perfectly "social" way.

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The combined effect of these two outcomes tried to push the ostensibly "theoretical" debate over what to call these bodies of knowledge into the background. The claim of a "history of religions" or a Religionswissenschaft that presumed to judge other researchers' methods and outputs — issuing stamps of approval more reminiscent of the Holy Office than the Enlightenment — was simply not credible. Equally, the use of *Sciences religieuses* for a historian's perspective (a role in which Émile Poulat cast himself en sociologue, as a historian of society) did not fully clarify the problem of the existence of forms of knowledge marked by a "connatural" relationship between object and method. It was not the naming of the thing that made the difference, but a more radical option (one likewise exposed to the risk of ending up in the Museum of Wasted Efforts!), concerning the naming of the thing itself: namely, the use of the word "religion/religions," which has lent itself to a tug-of-war that reached into the jargon of European research when the question arose of defining how and to what end these kinds of studies could stand inside or outside the perimeter of the European Union's scientific investment.

The cult of French *laïcité* had for a long time compelled the Commission and its research policies to steer clear of the word "religion" and all the adjectives that inflect it. Preference was given to multicultural or intercultural dialogue — but not on the premise that a religious experience expresses itself, as thought expresses itself in words, through a cultural phonetics; rather on the assumption that neutralizing the religious within the cultural would make it possible to imagine the pluralism of faiths, practices, and denominations as a series of lakeside villages arranged around the Great Lake of Secularity, neatly distinct, like clusters of tiny separate lights in a night upon which the light of historical realism never rises.

So it happened — and those who speak of it were witnesses and accomplices — that only a sustained effort managed to introduce the expression "religious studies" first into European research programming, then into its networks, its infrastructures, and hopefully its consortia.

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The modern man — the one whom Odo Marquard says you can recognize from a distance because he is always having to justify himself — includes the scholar, who must justify himself before policy makers (and alongside them before all those who regard their own existential choices as the norm against which the exception must answer): those who study these problems must often, if not always,

justify the value of a body of knowledge defined by its object — thus "Religions," as if we knew what we meant by a word whose paternalistic ambiguity reassures atheists and bigots alike.

I understand and forgive the use of "Religions" in that zone where scientific research and policy planning meet. And I note that the success of "Religions" is due to the fact that, like a thousand other words in the Eurocratic lexicon, no one complains when it is empty — indeed, they appreciate it precisely for that. Like sustainable, disruptive, holistic, resilient, or excellent — so many other terms in the Berlaymont dialect — "Religion" works because everyone pretends to mean the same thing, without having to wade into disquisitions that are too subtle or difficult.

In this specific case, however, the use of "Religion" as though it were a truism is particularly irritating for those who know they have to put up with it (on pain of returning to ostracism), yet cannot fail to see its radical limitation. Because "religions," as is well known, do not exist: whether God exists is a contested matter; but that "religions" do not exist for the historian is beyond dispute. Nowhere does a coherent and stable theoretical construct exist, fixed per tabulas, intelligible and consistent.

What "exist" are flesh-and-blood human beings, persons shaped by a culture. Persons who appropriate a higher sense of obligation by exercising their freedom — whether to protect, express, or surrender it. Human beings moved by impulses that reside in Droysen's already-cited temple of consciousness, and of whose choices, acts, and declared intentions we can take note.

Without forcing the door of that temple and without peering through the psychoanalytic keyhole, we see how human beings relate, through hermeneutical acts, to Scriptures, to the institutions they bring into being, to the practices they conform to, and to the manner of worship they observe. We do not see "religions," because what we see are the experiences and conceptions that originate them — always and in every case within a history, within the history — and which for that reason are open to a form of knowing that may be *ex professo* historical or of some other type, but which is in any case a science of the human and of human sociality.

The essentialism and extrinsicism that underlie the category of "Religion" loses all of this: but that seems to be the price of justifying oneself before public funding authorities, chasing alien agendas — ecotheologies, just war, and so on — swearing up and down to the not-complete uselessness of what drives us to seek the thirst for knowledge, the critical passion, the sense of *Beruf* to which we are made capable by our possession of the tools of history for excavating the human condition in its unfolding and its self-positing.

What I have described is not a destiny: it is a choice. It is, ultimately, the lazy and contemptuous choice of those who gamble that those with the political responsibility for funding research — the premise being that they are fools — will find within their limited instruments, timeframes, and horizons a

reason not to defund studies like ours. Studies and research that in my view can and must be "defended" or "promoted" or "justified" in an entirely different way.

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"*Primi quarti turbulenti saeculi peracto*": thus the publisher Brepols sent its Christmas and New Year's greetings at the end of 2025. A very precise and far from optimistic judgment on the direction taken by this century, which has filed away its first five decades but has decidedly set off on a turbulent course. And this is where I want to dwell.

Many things have changed in this first quarter of the century. Not changed enough to shake the methodological skepticism I share with Qoheleth about what lies at the bottom of the human soul. Not changed enough to bring me into line with the chorus of "nothing will ever be the same again" that has accompanied a journalism reluctant to become history. Surely, however, there are some "things" that have become visible: and among these, two attract my attention.

The first is the *katastrophé* in which many multi-century cycles that have shaped the West come to an end simultaneously: because the change of era evoked by Pope Francis is not composed of linear substitutions; it consists in the concurrent closure of the great cycle of the eleventh century, which bound law to power; of the great cycle of the sixteenth century, which bound territory to authority; of the great cycle of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which saw the intelligence of economics as proof of a messianism intrinsic to the productive process; and of the shorter cycle of "*nie wieder*" born from the victory over Nazifascism, which carried within it a repudiation of war, antisemitism, and nationalism. In all these processes it is clear that religious potentials are evoked which require analytical dexterities that cannot be improvised or produced on the spot.

The second is the perception that the apparently unstoppable and seemingly infinite flow of people away from religious practice and toward a self-assured, conscious atheism has not been total, unstoppable, or free of rebound effects: the very abandonment of "Fort Synthesis" — due to the hyper-specialization of the disciplinary bodies of knowledge — has handed that outpost over to those whom, *faute de mieux*, we call "fundamentalisms," "integrisms," "extremisms." I do not intend to keep searching for a term capable of describing the scope of a process that today sees articulated theological constructs — Vance's *ordo amoris*, the Hindutva of the India of Rama and Modi, Christian Zionism blending with Ben Gvir's Kahanism, not to mention the preaching of the theological descendants of Al-Banna, Khomeinist Shiism, the Russkij Mir, the evangelical world of Paula White — entering the daily lives of individuals, communities, and peoples, and reshaping perceptions of enemies and friends, individual and collective behavior.

Someone will tell me, paraphrasing Bill Clinton: "it's Religion, stupid." And yet I would hold firm here to my idiosyncratic resistance to speaking of "Religion" and would try to argue what specific value a

simple categorization like "Religious studies" and an initiative like RESILIENCE possesses — a value that must be asserted forcefully.

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When great confessional or denominational traditions find that a growing share of their practicing audience has been captured by ideological postures that turn articles of faith into instruments of power, violence, and war, it means that the diachronic and synchronic complexity of that great tradition has been lost. For simplified and blunt versions to replace a ramified system of tensions between hermeneutics, theologies in the making, and lacerations and recompositions between groups, religious illiteracy must wash away those patrimonies over medium to long stretches of time and present the bill of antagonistic logics (against modernity, for instance) that produce serious cognitive eclipses.

For those content with "Religion," this means going in search of theoretical models of the social process that leads to those outcomes — models that will be sophisticated for Luhmannians and simpler for practitioners of the triple-P cult (Panels, Papers, Peer review). Models that show that critical or political instruments of pure containment with immediate implementation — take the French case — are demonstrably ineffective.

Those who believe instead that the production of historical-religious "knowledge" carries weight know very well that the temporal scale of public fertility is far wider, but no less binding for that: no violence will be prevented by the production of scholarly knowledge today, but without today's knowledge no violence of tomorrow can be prevented. And fertilizing bodies of knowledge and making them actionable is the point at hand — and it is what RESILIENCE is for.

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RESILIENCE therefore does not have "religions" as its object. Its object is the production of knowledge and the study of religious experience — through the conceptions that express it *ex post* or *ex ante*, and the gestures that flow from it — with a dimension grounded not in comparison or anthropology, but in the historical weight produced in each particular context. For this reason, its primary goal is to protect specialisms.

RESILIENCE's first "service" is not to make the scholarly life less painful by equipping the researcher with entry points, digital tools, and AI-based pre-screening. It is, on the contrary, to make more visible the benchmark that demands immersion in another historical present — with its languages, alphabets, traditions, and interpretive stratifications. Europe does not need 55,000 experts in Judeo-Arabic or 55,000 scholars of Hildegard of Bingen or 55,000 experts on Mullā adrā: but it cannot have

none. And it is so that these 13 specialists have space and voice that we federate centers and universities, schools and courses, libraries and archives.

RESILIENCE's second "service" is to show how the very idea of the marketplace needs to be rethought. Carlos Moedas taught that research moves "from money to knowledge" and innovation moves "from knowledge to money": the marketplace of historical-religious knowledge has an obvious research component, but also an obvious innovation component — which is the wishful projection of entrepreneurial standards onto an imaginary market where the currency is cash. The "money" that this body of knowledge produces is made of immaterial coins, called cohesion, justice, equality, peace.

And it is here that the question of AI comes into play.

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The blanket of banality that has settled over the topic of artificial intelligence is thick and heavy. From many quarters, the chain of scientific discoveries and AI applications has been viewed as though everything this tool brings and is bringing were "new." In reality, a modicum of historical awareness tells us that from the discovery of fire to the present day, every major cross-cutting human invention has redefined power relations, redrawn economic arrangements, posed the ethical dilemma between good and evil, and altered the way both applied and speculative sciences operate. From this standpoint, AI is nothing more and nothing less than one more instance. So much so that in the scientific journey that produced it, a postulate operated — anything but neutral, anything but new — that a "mathematics" of the macrocosm and microcosm exists, and that a machine, by definition non-human, can therefore emulate an intelligence that is by definition human and thus natural. So much so that we call "artificial intelligence" a set of "res" that strictly speaking are neither intelligent nor artificial.

Among the not-so-new things about AI is the fact that it has redefined the composition of different bodies of knowledge: just as with every great discovery (from law to physics, from biology to semiotics, and so on), AI is redrawing not only the palatability but also the potential of various scientific fields, right down to their niches.

For many decades, for example, the so-called humanities (or SSH, in international acronym) have been among the last to make use of large technological "machines": after the physicists, economists, physicians, and biologists, the humanists arrived last to avail themselves of consolidated scientific tools, long since absorbed into the academic services market. Proof of this is the use of the adjective "digital" in the SSH sphere and the creation of the compound "digital humanities" — which has no parallel in other domains (just because computers are used, nobody thought to call physics "digital physics"): it was the self-certification of that type of scholarship as positioned at a great distance from

the frontiers of advanced technological research. The historical-religious niche, within the humanities, was perfectly aligned with this scheme — up until the launch of RESILIENCE-RI and, in Italy, the strengthening initiatives of ITSERR.

These large-scale international collaboration projects, which found themselves operational precisely as the AI bubble began to inflate, made it possible to experiment with these technological innovations as they were being born and to compare them with what was happening elsewhere. As it became increasingly clear that the same algorithm could be trained on medical or astronomical, archaeological or biochemical data, the position of the scholar who studies human thought and action was shifting.

And the position of the scholar of the religious was shifting in its specific physiognomy (conceptions, experiences, texts, norms, cults), because unlike in other sectors: i) it had at its disposal sources generating quantities of data no less substantial — indeed often more substantial — than those that come down from a satellite photographing the celestial vault above or the clouds below; ii) it was able to verify, without any effort and without margin of error, the responses to prompts (a past participle never used in one set of sources and never in another admits no oscillation). While the medical or physics scholar's output must match an outcome or measure a theory, the religious scholar's output possesses a set of philological, theological, and historical dexterities capable of refining models and algorithms, to the benefit of other fields of knowledge.

Within the broad spectrum that falls under the label of "science with AI," historical-religious knowledge therefore performs a specific function that positions it not among the late and passive users of digital innovation byproducts, but among the proactive and validating actors in the first phase of the use of innovative technologies.

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The unprecedented position that AI assigns to the humanities — and specifically the position that historical-religious knowledge holds within them — imposes on these disciplines today a severe reckoning and a no-regrets farewell to the logic of the "digital humanities" (and all its derivatives).

For a long time, in fact, technological innovation was conceived as a tool for compressing the time factor: instead of going to the Bibliothèque Nationale or the Vatican Library to consult a manuscript, you can do so without moving; instead of going to a library, you can download the part you need; instead of viewing things in physical space, you can see them on a screen or in 3D. The essential saving is of time and concerns heuristics: because the construction of questions and hermeneutics remains intact and is at most increased by the contraction of time in terms of "productivity."

What AI-based research permits, however, is not merely a net gain in time (though that gain does exist — for instance, the use of AI to screen out unworthy books and superficial articles, so as to concentrate on more substantive texts): it is a gain in horizons of knowledge. One that requires a radical intellectual leap and the effort of thinking through impossible questions "without AI."

The standardization of evaluation systems — represented by the comically Jungian category of impact — has in fact opened a sprawling season of historiographical mannerism in the SSH generally, in history in particular, and most intensely in historical-religious research. A fixed sequence of statements that includes: the justification of the problem; then the *actio finium regundorum* that perimeters the sources to the bare minimum with the least possible expenditure of intellectual energy; then the disputatio that typically polemicizes with one author or school of thought and vindicates another; and finally the *expensio* of one's own position. The increase in knowledge at the end of this journey is zero, and it simply illustrates the variety of human cases.

It is precisely in reaction to this that we need to try to enumerate the impossible questions: those that are not satisfied with a handful of first-hand sources and defer everything else "to another occasion"; those that distinguish between types of sources in order to engage them in their intersections; those that do not count the illustration of the plurality of cases and experiences as knowledge (nothing is as compact as it appears at a superficial reading, nothing is so different that it cannot admit a higher-order categorization), but seek deeper structures — whether because they are more expressive of what the subject grasps in the *très courte durée* we call a life (of individuals, communities, institutions, and so on), or because they are better suited to capturing tendencies over a *(pas trop) longue durée*.

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Let us now return to the policy maker and explain to him that a research infrastructure that does not study religions but gives religious studies — which excavate the human condition through time and the real processes of historical transformation — an essential voice in this time that is the age of hate. Everyone knows Heinrich Mann's opening lines when he explains what the Nazis of the years preceding the seizure of power in 1933 do with hatred:

> "For they are in mortal fear of the old spiritual heritage of the nation they have undertaken to 'revive.' It is against this spiritual strength that they have been inciting the mob. As their system is anti-democratic they needs must cater to the mob. They have reached a stage where they see no alternative before themselves except the expulsion of the thinkers and authors who were the Germany of yesterday — and of tomorrow. We have been compelled to flee our country. The next step was to burn books — something the world had not witnessed since the days of the Inquisition. And if in the beginning the works of contemporary authors only were consumed in the bonfires, they are commencing to burn the works of the classics as well. And small wonder — for our classic literature is an expression of our humaneness, the

> antithesis of their own philosophy, if any. The first two to have been delivered to the flames were Lessing and Heine. And having Goethe next, this greatest of Germany's greatest. They hark back to the Dark Ages, for they tremble with fear. When hate reaches its limit and finds no more fodder for itself, it gives way to fear. I discern it in their government offices, in their councils, where they have never passed any legislation for the common weal, but have concentrated exclusively on measures for their own well-being and preservation. To convert more Germans into abject slaves — that is their problem. Terror and more terror is their sole unifying slogan. Having promised his adopted fatherland to perfect the executioner's art to a degree never before known in Germany, Hitler has truly distinguished himself as a master hangman. His young, alert Minister of Propaganda advises him where to erect the scaffolds and where to install the platforms for the moving picture cameras, so as to perpetuate the 'great events.' Thus hate has reached its peak. It cannot go any higher. And even unprecedented hate is being converted into unreasoning, mortal fear."

In this age of hate that turns into mortal fear, the vocabulary of the religious furnishes abundant materials: and knowing how to deconstruct its history, its layers, its reasons may be the only thing that keeps the disaster from becoming limitless.

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And I will close by offering an immediate example. Everyone remembers that in Pulp Fiction Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) pretends to quote Ezek. 25:17 before shooting a small-time drug thief. In reality, the passage is a reworked quotation from Sonny Chiba's 1976 film Karate Kiba (The Bodyguard):

> "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy My brothers. And you will know My name is the Lord when I lay My vengeance upon thee."

Tarantino's intention is unstated, but the effect is clear: to mock the biblical fundamentalism of those who, propter ignorantiam, invoke the Bible at every turn but have so superficial a knowledge of it that they fail to notice the misquote. It is therefore of enormous interest that Pete Hegseth, in April 2026, invited an audience of airmen to prayer by reciting Ezek. 25:17 as the aviators' prayer before a rescue mission — without being touched, not even for a moment (nor were the devout and reverential bystanders present), by doubt about whether the vengeance that in the real Ezek. 25:17 belongs to God might lawfully be enacted by men.

The ability of a European research infrastructure to compete with the Pentagon is, honestly, modest. But in the end, preserving the possibility of adding a midrash on the fake Ezek. 25:17, still Jules's:

> "The truth is you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men. But I'm trying, Ringo. I'm trying real hard to be the shepherd."