

## RELIGION, RECONSTRUCTION, COMPARISON FROM THE WORK OF FRITZ STOLZ

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In the German-speaking area, particularly in Switzerland, Fritz Stolz (1942-2001) has contributed decisively to the establishment of the study of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) as an independent academic discipline. Besides representing the study of religions within the theological and philosophical academic communities in Switzerland and Germany, he was a member of several academic policy organizations. For several years he chaired the Swiss Society for the Science of Religions; in this function he tried to integrate French- with German-speaking traditions, as well as the sociology of religions with the history of religions, which he understood as sub-fields within the same discipline.

Fritz Stolz studied theology and ancient near eastern studies in Zurich and Heidelberg. In 1969, after receiving his doctorate in OT at the University of Zurich, he moved to the Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel-Bielefeld, first as a lecturer in Hebrew and OT and later as a professor of OT. From 1980 until his death he taught history and science of religions (*Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte und Religionswissenschaft*) at the University of Zurich.

In retrospect the thematic and methodological changes in Stolz's work can be easily recognized. These changes reflect to some degree the different disciplines he taught during his academic life—OT and the study of religions. Nevertheless, his publications disclose from the very beginning a deep interest in the reconstruction and comparison of religious symbol systems from an external, not confessional or theological, point of view. As an OT scholar, he focused on a more anthropological than theological approach. In his more recent work, on the other hand, he frequently considered the differences and analogies between theology and the study of religions.

Stolz began his reflection on religion from an exegetical, historical-critical position. Later he developed an interest in the study of religions as a distinctive discipline: the comparative aspect, the search for an appropriate methodology in defining religion and reconstructing religious symbol systems, and the link between sociology and history of religions. These elements formed the basis for Stolz's studies of ancient near eastern religions and contemporary religions.

The present review summarizes the main stages in the work of Fritz Stolz based on a selection of his major publications. Since he worked on several topics at the same time, the publications are discussed thematically rather than in chronological order.

### I. Religion as a Religious Symbol System

The monograph *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, first published in 1988 and appearing in a third edition in 2001, was conceived as a general introduction to the science of religions. It was written with a didactic aim, and had numerous bibliographic references. Although it is a compendium of the main theories and problems of the field, this book reflects the author's vision of the study

of religions as an independent discipline and his theoretical approach to it. The monograph is divided into seven chapters.

Stolz begins his introduction with the problem of defining and delimiting the phenomenon of religion. Classic authors like Friedrich Heiler, Geo Widengren, Nathan Söderblom, and Rudolf Otto are cited for their definitions of religion that focus on the object of religion (God, the sacred, etc.). In contrast to this, Stolz also introduces how the sociology of religion defines religion: how religion functions as a fundamental element of society. Attention falls particularly on the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Niklas Luhmann. At the end of this overview, Stolz argues for the necessity of developing a contemporary approach to religion from a sociological, functional point of view.

The clarification of basic definition strategies leads to the second chapter, where the aims of the science of religion are discussed, particularly with regard to the theological disciplines. Theology and the science of religions are both seen as scientific (in the German sense of *wissenschaftlich*) approaches to religion, the difference between them being determined by their distinctive tasks and standpoints. Theology, the theology of mission, the theology of dialogue, and the theology of religions develop a scientific reflection on religion and religions rooted in faith; they argue from an insider perspective. The study of religions, in contrast, supports an analysis of religious phenomena from an outside viewpoint and, as a matter of principle, avoids a normative approach to the research object. The opposition between theology as a scientific study "from within" and the science of religions as a scientific study "from without" is used as a heuristic category rather than as a strict definition of these fields.

In the third chapter Stolz takes up the functionalistic approach to religions and deepens it in the context of a broader discussion of the link between community and religion. Also in this chapter, selected classical authors are presented in order to introduce the main questions of the sociology of religion, particularly Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The interaction between religion and community is then concretized in two directions: on the one hand, the role of religion in the relationship between individual and community in different types of society and, on the other, the role of religion in the interface between community and natural environment. The section is concluded by the correlation between typologies of social and religious systems.

Seen in light of Stolz's entire work, the fourth section of *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, entitled "The Religious Message and Its Representation," is, in my opinion, the central one. This chapter focuses on the description and reconstruction of a religious symbol system as a complex structured communication system. To situate his definition within the history of research, the author relates the positions of Max Müller, William Robertson Smith, the myth and ritual school, and the structuralist approach (with an overview of Lévi-Strauss's contribution). For Stolz, religion has to provide a general orientation: it has to tie the experience of the uncontrollable with controllable aspects of reality, and it has to transform uncontrollable into controllable fields. Religion creates values and norms, it constructs reality in a basic way. Religion is a fundamental system for assigning meaning (*Sinngebungssystem*) that influences other such systems. As a system for assigning meaning, religion operates with the contrast between representations of the world and alternate worlds (*Gegenwelten*). Religion is comparable to language; its symbols can be seen as signs with both aspects, signifier and signified. Unlike language, however, religion articu-

lates its messages simultaneously on many levels or forms of codification, i.e., at the level of action, visual signs, and language.

The symbols of a religious system can be considered from different points of view. On the one hand, a symbol as a single element of the whole system expresses significance; refers to other symbols or combination of symbols (according to the context, Stolz uses the terms *Sinn*, *Bedeutung* and *Zeigefunktion*). On the other hand, symbols are always tied into complex systems. For example, a ritual links elements of action with visual and language elements: it happens in a particular space, is associated with specific music and with a specific mood, and is characterized by particular light, odors, etc. The interpretation of a religious symbol system requires a reconstruction of the interaction between the symbols. Stolz proposes an approach in three steps. The *semantic* approach aims to reconstruct the meaning of single symbolic elements. Here the question concerns the references implied by a particular symbol. The *syntactic* approach concerns the link between different symbols. As an illustration, the application of this syntactic approach to a myth leads to the description of the transformation resulting from the succession of the different elements in the narration. The elements presented at the beginning of the myth are subjected to an irreversible transformation that describes also a process from an initial, unstable stage to the stability of the resulting situation at the end of the narration. Finally, the religious communication can also be described from the *pragmatic* approach. The central question aims to reconstruct the use or uses of a religious message. The final sections of the central chapter develop other important components of a religious symbol system: general order principles of religious symbol systems (binary and ternary categorizations); the normative, ethic implications of the religious symbol system; the level of speculation and reflection within religious symbol systems; and the collapse of religious symbol systems as means of global orientation in modernity.

In the fifth chapter the function of religion is considered from a psychological point of view; the individual and its inner world are placed at the center of attention. Basic concepts and questions of the psychology of religion are discussed with references to central theories and authors. The two last chapters are devoted to the relation between the science of religions and the history of religions in relation to theories of evolution and the phenomenology of religion. Although this line of thought has elaborated useful classification criteria, Stolz argues that it can no longer meet the contemporary methodological needs of the study of religions.

*Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft* articulates Stolz's concept of the science of religions as an independent discipline with its own identity. At the same time, the plurality of questions and methods within this field, which encompasses sociological, psychological, linguistic, and historical methods, is neither denied nor reduced. Rather, such plurality is understood to be the challenge for defining the discipline. The book, which appeared toward the beginning of Stolz's engagement as a professor of the science of religions, exhibits traits that are characteristic of his work generally. Others, such as the centrality of a comparative approach based on a functional definition of religion, receive only brief mention. They are elaborated later in articles, the most significant of which are these: "Hierarchien der Darstellung religiöser Botschaft" (1988c), "Paradiese und Gegenwelten" (1993a), "Verstehens- und Wirkungsverweigerung als Merkmal religiöser Texte" (1993b), "Religiöse Symbole in religionswissenschaftlicher Rekonstruktion" (1994b), "Austauschprozesse zwischen religiösen Gemeinschaften und Symbolsystemen" (1996a),

"Vergleich von Produkten und Produktionsregeln religiöser Kommunikation" (1997b), and "Effekt und Kommunikation, Handlung im Verhältnis zu anderen Kodierungsformen von Religion" (1998).

## II. Images of the World

Stolz's concern for method developed as he worked on the OT and ancient near eastern traditions. He moved back and forth between theoretical matters and specific aspects of religious symbol systems. Such interaction makes it quite difficult to draw a clear distinction between his publications on method and those on the history of religions.

The focus of this second section will be a few selected studies on religion, both historical and contemporary. Although very different in their content, all these publications examine the reconstruction of the images of the world produced by religious symbol systems in the past or present.

From the very beginning of his work as an OT scholar, Stolz devoted himself to the origins and peculiarities of biblical monotheism (1977, 1980, 1994a, 2001c). The monograph *Einführung in den biblischen Monotheismus*, published in 1996, contains an analysis of monotheism in ancient Israel as a topic under the study of religions. The analysis begins with a reflection on the problem of conceptualizing monotheism and projecting it onto the OT and ancient near eastern traditions. The discussion of global models describing monotheism leads to the reconstruction of fundamental stages in the development of the monotheistic God concepts in ancient Israel. Although structured according to a chronological scheme, the main section of the study evidences the coexistence of different conceptions, particularly in the postexilic tradition streams. In the last chapter the same question is extended to other religious traditions, such as Christianity, Gnosis, and Islam, and even to modernity.

The concept of myth was an issue that concerned Stolz throughout his career. The reflection on this topic was not elaborated systematically in a monograph, but rather developed in several contributions, such as *Funktionen und Leistungen des Mythos* (1982), edited with Jan Assman and Walter Burkert, "Der mythische Umgang mit der Rationalität und der rationale Umgang mit dem Mythos" (1988) and "Von der Weisheit zur Spekulation" (1991). These essays, written over a long period, address the general question of the relationship between religion and philosophy. The transition from traditional forms and genres of religious narration—mythical and wisdom texts—to various forms of speculation and rationality is analyzed and concretized in selected ancient sources. In *Funktionen und Leistungen des Mythos*, classical universal patterns and definitions of myth are tested via a comparative approach to ancient Egyptian (Assmann), Mesopotamian (Burkert) and west Semitic (Stolz) myths. Stolz's contribution to this collection of articles deepens particularly the link between the mythical literary tradition and the other levels of representation. Images and actions with the same cultic background, the link between myth and similar forms of narration (sagas and fables), and the performance of myth as an explication of order are discussed with an analysis of the Ugaritic Ba'al myth. "Der mythische Umgang mit der Rationalität und der rationale Umgang mit dem Mythos" focuses on the asymmetrical relation between myth and rationality, whereas both are seen as religiously relevant strategies to achieve orientation and order. Finally, in "Von der Weisheit zur Spekulation," wisdom traditions from ancient Israel and Mesopotamia are considered

with regard to the concept of speculation as a prior stage to science. Here the stress lies on the place of these different approaches in the human construction of world images.

Beginning in the late eighties, besides studying west Semitic and Mesopotamian religious systems, Stolz worked on contemporary religious forms, particularly on pluralism, secularization and fundamentalism. Among Stolz's several publications on this subject, two studies, edited in collaboration with other scholars, are of particular interest: *Zukunftsperspektiven des Fundamentalismus*, with Victor Merten (1991b), and *Ein jedes Herz in seiner Sprache, Religiöse Individualisierung als Herausforderung für die Kirchen*, with Michael Krüggeler (1996c). Both publications were produced in response to urgent contemporary questions. With several contributions from different points of view, the first aimed at clarifying the theoretical and empirical premises underlying the analysis of fundamentalist trends, especially within traditional religions in Switzerland. Stolz's approach to fundamentalism was not developed from a general definition, but from the question of certain constant characteristics, such as ideological background, the organizational forms, typology of communities, patterns of strategies, and the typology of religious practice. In renouncing the attempt to define the contents of fundamentalism, Stolz applies a strictly functional viewpoint to a central contemporary question, as he did in the study of ancient religious systems.

*Ein jedes Herz in seiner Sprache*, produced as a reflection on empirical research on individual religious habits and concepts in Switzerland, is conceived as an interdisciplinary exchange between the science of religions and theology. This collection analyzes the role and the function of traditional religious institutions in a multicultural and multireligious society in relation to the individual. The study describes religious individuation and organizational forms of religion, especially within Christian traditions. The book is also interesting as an example of collaboration between science of religions and theology: whereas the scholars of religions supply a survey and an analysis of the questions, the theologians elaborate possible strategies for a response to the social situation in the religious institutions they represent.

Stolz's last monograph, *Weltbilder der Religionen*, appeared in 2001, as his incurable illness reached an advanced stage. Like *Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft*, it was a textbook for students in which Stolz takes a methodological approach to provide a general introduction in the history of religions. The work follows a comparative procedure based on a functional definition of religion. The images of the world (*Weltbilder*) constituted in specific religious symbol systems are analyzed and compared on the basis of binary categories expressing a fundamental difference (*Grunddifferenz*): immanent/transcendent (*Diesselts/Jenseits*), culture/nature, controllable/uncontrollable. These categories allow Stolz to approach in a comparative manner the religious construction of world images, which he understood to be an instrument for orientation in different societies. Religious symbol systems elaborate the opposition between immanent/transcendent, culture/nature, controllable/uncontrollable in a dual way: on the one hand, the uncontrollable elements are transformed into controllable ones, while on the other hand they are only detected and described as uncontrollable.

Against this methodological background, Stolz analyzes selected religious symbol systems from a host of cultures: aboriginal, Australian, Indonesian, Mesopotamian, ancient Chinese, Indian, and Greek. The author also focuses on the same question within

monotheistic contexts, such as ancient Israel, Christianity in antiquity and the middle ages, and Islam. Finally, he concentrates on the consequences of the Enlightenment in the pluralistic formulation and relativization of images of the world. The structure of this overview of selected religious symbol systems follows neither a chronological nor a geographic system. The examples are ordered according to increasing complexity in a strategy for ensuring a general orientation.

*Weltbilder der Religionen* cannot be compared with encyclopedic works like Eliade's *A History of Religious Ideas*, which aims at a comprehensive overview of world religions and is based on a phenomenological conception of religion. As an attempt to build a pattern of comparison between religions from different times, places and cultures from a functionalistic point of view, *Weltbilder der Religionen* is an interesting contribution in a field which lacked a concise introduction based on a self-conscious method.

### III. Selected Themes in the Study of Religions

Most of the themes Fritz Stolz addressed in his several publications are situated at the junction of history and theory. To illustrate this, I will briefly refer to three publications that appeared in the series *Studia Religiosa Helvetica*, published by the Swiss Society for the Science of Religions: *Homo naturaliter religiosus* (1997a), *Religiöse Kartographie* (2000), and *Noch eine Chance für die Religionsphänomenologie?* (2001a). These works are proceedings, assembling controversial positions on specific topics, the last two edited with other scholars.

*Homo naturaliter religiosus* raises the question about the foundation of the universality of religion. Anthropological, psychological, social and evolutionary models are critically discussed and compared to one another. *Religiöse Kartographie* focuses on the relationship between elements of religious symbol systems and the category of space. Several contributions from different European schools of thought examine this issue with historical and contemporary studies. And *Noch eine Chance für die Religionsphänomenologie?* assembles very controversial essays on the utility of the phenomenology of religion in the present. This book is particularly interesting as a survey of divergent receptions and understandings of a research stream that has influenced the field over several decades. In his contribution, analyzing Mesopotamian examples of theophanies, Stolz illustrated the limits of phenomenological approaches without disregarding their undisputed merits.

The monographs, collections, and articles discussed in the present review point out some interesting methodological and thematic topics in the study of religions. They are only a small selection from a corpus consisting of about one hundred titles. The body of work focusing on the OT and ancient Israel are not considered here. Even among the contributions in the science of religions, the selection presented here could be seen as narrow. I have chosen writings that reflect current trends in this field.

A reading across the presented contributions reveals some recurring themes that are fundamental for understanding the whole work of Stolz. Perhaps the most striking of all is the vision of the study of religions as an independent and autonomous discipline. Consequently, the broad spectrum of methods and approaches originating in related disciplines is both characteristic of, and the challenge for, the study of religions. The dialogue among historical, sociological, and psychological aspects converges into a science addressing reli-

gious phenomena through different times, places, and cultures. Further, reflection on theoretical premises and methods always happens in the context of analyzing historical or contemporary sources and phenomena. Stolz does not attempt to formulate a general theory about religion, but he reflects on the possibilities and the basic conditions for a scientific approach to religious symbol systems from without.

Fritz Stolz used to write in a plain style, often with a (self) ironic touch. His thoughts are expressed very concisely and sometimes interesting arguments are presented only briefly. For instance, his procedure for analyzing historical and contemporary materials from a semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic point of view appeared in a condensed manner in several writings, but nowhere was it fully articulated. The pragmatic dimension in particular never receives much elaboration. It can also be said that although Stolz worked mostly on religious-historical issues, his writings always stressed the fundamental importance of sociological approaches as a general premise of the study of religions. On the other hand, the psychology of religion was never fully integrated in his general conception of the field and its methods.

Viewed in the context of his whole work, it is clear that theory represented a heuristic instrument for Stolz. Reflection on a theoretical level interacted with the analysis of historical and contemporary sources and questions. Depending on one's point of view, this procedure can be evaluated positively or negatively. The strong interaction between theory and the analysis of sources allows for approaches that are innovative, but at the same time methodologically controlled. In this sense, the approach builds a fairly creative framework for the scientific study of religions. On the other hand, this procedure can be criticized as being too reductive, in the sense that religious sources and phenomena could potentially be reduced to simple illustrations of the theoretical premises. *Weltbilder der Religionen* (2001b), for example, has been appreciated as well as criticized for these reasons.

The distinction between the study of religions as a discipline that approaches religion from without and theology as a discipline that approaches religions from within can also be considered ambivalent. If used as a heuristic category to distinguish between different kinds of reflection on religion, this dichotomy is useful as a general orientation. If considered as an exhaustive conception of this academic field, however, it can hardly cope with the complexity of the relationship between the study of religions and theology. For instance, neither historical-critical approaches to the sources nor the philosophy of religions could be properly classified.

Stolz's premature death means that his work was far from complete. This essay provides some sense of its development and direction, but many of his intuitions were never pursued, many projects left undone, and many questions he asked remain open.

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