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Religion, Science and Liberalism:

On Religion in Staatslexikon

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Introduction

One way of investigating the relationship between religion and science is to focus on religion as an object of scientific study.¹ Different aspects of religion can be subjects for human knowledge by being studied in the humanities and the social sciences. Religious studies as an academic subject independent of theology is often regarded to have been born as late as in the 1870's, when Max Müller became the first professor of comparative religion at Oxford University. But of course the study of religion has a prehistory earlier than that. As with most intellectual endeavours, it is possible to find its precursors in classical antiquity, for example in the writings of Herodotus. But as is the case with modern social sciences in general, the roots of the modern religious studies may be traced back to the Enlightenment, and its

celebration of human reason and systematisation of knowledge. Around the year 1800, there are a couple of German examples which could be highlighted as at least important prehistory to the modern religious studies. Historian of religions Sigurd Hjelde points at Christian Wilhelm Flügel and colleagues in Göttingen, who wanted to do a comparative scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*), and the reformed theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose work on religion and Christianity has been formative of much of the study in the 19th and 20th Century.²

During the earlier part of the 19th Century there is a lively intellectual discussion about what religion is, upon what it could be based and what role religion, especially Christianity, plays and should play in society. The aim of this paper is to contribute to a historical synchronous understanding of the academic knowledge of religion during this time by presenting how religion is characterised in one magisterial work of the “social science” of the *Vormärz* period, namely the *Staatslexikon*.

Staatslexikon was a twelve volume German encyclopaedia published in three editions in the middle of the 19th Century. The second edition, published between 1845 and 1848, with the full title of *Das Staats-Lexikon. Encyclopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände*,³ is the one which was most spread and most influential and the edition used for this paper.

The editors of *Staatslexikon* were Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, two university professors active in the southwest German university town of Freiburg. Rotteck was a professor in world history and political science (*Staatswissenschaft*), and Welcker in law (*Rechtswissenschaft*). Both were also politically active liberals, and were parliament members

in the state of Baden for more than two decades. The editors wrote many of the articles in the encyclopaedia themselves, but there were many other authors involved. The second edition of *Staatslexikon* was widely read and influential in German-speaking Europe, especially among the liberal middle classes.⁴

For this work I have identified and read about twenty articles for this work which I found to suit my task of investigating religion as a subject of academic knowledge. My approach is inspired by conceptual history, in that I am interested in the historical semantics of the concepts analysed. The premise is that concepts, and with them human knowledge, are changeable throughout history, and tied to the historical contexts, to time and place, to society and class structures, and this includes also the human conceptualisation of religion.⁵ I am in this paper interested in the synchronous historical character of the knowledge of religion and do not myself go into any normative discussions with the sources.

Religion and Christianity in *Staatslexikon*

A suitable place to start this brief exposition of religion in *Staatslexikon* would be in the article “Religion”, written by the historian and priest Andreas Buchner. Religion is here seen as something that enhances man, something which makes him man in a higher sense, and is a deeper phase of the human existence, which connects him with the divine. Buchner sees religion and the ideas of God as something progressing through history: “The intuition turned into perception, perception into concept, the concept embodied itself into a person.”⁶ From the most personal Gods, the Greek olymps, the development was in the direction of concept again, although in a higher sense, as the Old Testament ruler and the New Testament loving father. Further, religion is “recognition and worship of God”,⁷ and the worldly forms of

religion in Buchner's explication are something which starts in the human images of the divine.

But religion is also something which is of importance to the function of society, and Buchner, referring to one of the *Staatslexikon* editors, Karl von Rotteck, says that even though the religiously bound morality is something else than the laws of society, it is of importance with religion for the social actions of the people, "religion makes every civic duty a thing of the conscience,"⁸ and atheists cannot be good citizens.

This is a theme which is repeated throughout *Staatslexikon*. The question of societal integration is found in the article dealing exclusively with atheism, written by Gottlob Christian Abt, theologian and philologist. His point is that for the masses, church dogma is needed for morality and as soon as the church is outdated and people adhere to "vulgar" atheism, the foundation of morality and "public virtue" is lost.⁹ Interesting here is that this is in no way a defence of the church of Abt's own time, instead, he is worried that it is too notoriously strict, not "with its time" and opposed to freedom of religion and religious thought. In a bold argumentation, he connects the church's opposition against what he calls philosophical or scientific atheism¹⁰ – the religious philosophy of the likes of philosophers Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel – with the risk for vulgar atheism or godlessness of the masses. The philosophical pursuit of religion which in one way may seem contradictory to the church is nothing but a search for a more sophisticated form of the religious feeling inherent in man.¹¹ Therefore, if the church opposes it too much, it shows itself to be strict and outmoded, which ultimately leads to it becoming ridiculous and losing its grip over the people.

While showing that atheism is a very difficult and changeable concept in German religious history, historian Lucian Hölscher argues that for much of the 19th century, there were in the enlightened parts of society no problems of accepting a “theoretical atheism”, which could mean denying that God was a person, but very hard to accept “practical atheism”, which was open irreligiosity, very much tied to bourgeois morals.¹² As we see in *Staatslexikon*, Abt is clearly not at all worried about the philosophical atheism, which in his specific view is hardly atheism at all, since it is a higher pursuit of the divine, but very worried about a godless society.

For the general characterisation of religion, it is possible to see the influence of the thinking of the above-mentioned Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was not least influential during the early 19th century. His attempt to base religion outside of both theoretical and practical reason (or metaphysics and morality), instead locating in it the intuition (*Anschauung*) and feeling (*Gefühl*) of man, can be seen to be echoed in both Abt and Buchner.¹³ For Buchner, religion starts (historically) in the intuition, and Abt repeatedly states that religious philosophy and religion in its different historical and social forms are developments from the religious feeling of man.

Freedom of religion, and freedom to cultivate the religious thought, will secure a lively and engaged church, according to Abt, something which is the argument also of the other editor, Karl Theodor Welcker, who argues for a separation of state and church, while clinging to the idea of the importance of religion for society.¹⁴ Welcker’s articles about morality and even about law, which includes a chapter on the relation between law and morality, are basically about religion. Where law has its base in the external, objective and societal, moral in the first place is something internal, morality comes from the “religious conceptions and inner beliefs

of the transcendental, eternal, godly, and the relation of man to these.”¹⁵ In the article about morality, Welcker mainly polemicizes against the teachings of Machiavelli, which “dissociated itself from religion, morals and justice.”¹⁶ Welcker also writes that if Machiavelli had “managed to elevate himself to a Christian disposition and world-view like his greater compatriot Dante”,¹⁷ then he wouldn’t have accused Christianity of being an enemy to virtuous statecraft. Therefore, even though Welcker wants to separate state and church, and though he definitely does not want the Christian ethical teachings to be directly effectual as laws, because that is not the point of morality,¹⁸ he as well is a strong supporter of religion as moral educator of humanity.

The idea that Christianity and the teachings of Jesus were mainly worldly ethical doctrines was strong during the early 19th century within and outside of the church. Theological rationalism, which tended to downplay or argue away the metaphysical, mysterious and miraculous contents of the Bible, was influential, also in sermons and religious education.¹⁹ One of the main protagonists of this school of thought was theologian Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, who also wrote the articles in *Staatslexikon* dealing explicitly with the Bible, for example the article about the New Testament. Christianity is here presented as a new universal religion characterized by being rational and moral, not “founded on theological metaphysics of supernatural realities”, but instead containing “practical instructions” which were “undeniably true”.²⁰ From religion, and especially Christianity comes the possibility of the “perfection of humanity.”²¹

The rationality or reasonability of Christianity is further defended by Welcker in the article on “obscurantism”, which should be regarded as an opposite concept of enlightenment. As obscurantism, Welcker dismisses a collection of different political and religious views and

phenomena which have in common that they are superstitious, dogmatic and/or built on prejudices and therefore enemies to clear and correct thinking.²²

A firm belief in religious progress is upheld by most authors, not least by Welcker. According to him, progress and development are bedrocks of Christianity; throughout history it gradually improves itself and humanity. It dictates “a constant, tireless progress and growth in all perfection and active love”.²³

There is also an article about superstition (*Aberglaube*) written by Karl von Rotteck. He says that superstition is ideas about the invisible or supernatural, and means that it may be dangerous to society. Belief in the invisible or supernatural is not equalled with religious belief though. Rotteck writes that it *may* be hard to see the difference between belief, religious enthusiasm and mere superstition, but clearly there is here an idea that true religious belief is something else.²⁴ There is an important notion in the encyclopaedia among most authors that superstition is an enemy to true religion. This is again confirmed by the research of Lucian Hölscher, who states that in Germany, superstition became more closely tied to religion in the late 19th century, while during Enlightenment it was often more or less an opposite concept of it. And also, to reject the metaphysical and supernatural is not the same as being inclined towards denying the existence of God.

Conclusions and discussion

There are a couple of aspects to be highlighted here. Firstly, we may note the apologetic character of how religion is treated. Most of the authors appear as defenders of the Christian faith, albeit in the version they represent. At times the defensive stance may possibly be seen

as a fear of appearing subversive in a society where the church had more power than today and where liberal ideas were not always looked upon mildly by all authorities. But that would be to simplify. The ideas here are deeply founded in the Christian theology of the day, and there is a constant and sharp critique against other Christian schools of thought than their own. In general, religion is seen to be needed for its ethical qualities, to promote the civic duties of citizens and thereby contribute to the formation of the good society. In this, many authors give the teachings of Jesus a particular status as the best and most universal practical knowledge for the possibility of leading a good life.

Generally it could thusly be said that they were defenders of the true Christian faith and at the same time insisting on downplaying its supernatural content in favour of a rational understanding of it. There was a need to balance, as the author Schmetzer puts it, between the Scylla of unbelief and the Charybdis of hyper orthodoxy.²⁵ Some nuances may be difficult to understand here, but it may be clearer if we look upon two much more controversial theorists about religion of the period, Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss.²⁶

Though religion for Schleiermacher and for many of the authors in *Staatslexikon* started in the human intuition and feeling, that did not rule out the existence of God. A more radical turn in connection to this would come with the religious philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. He did not criticise Schleiermacher for identifying the feeling as the basis of religion, but for not drawing the consequences of it, which for Feuerbach would be the assertion that God objectively did not exist and that the essence of religion is the essence of man. That which man in religion makes conceptions about is not a transcendent God, but the immanent transcendence of humanity.²⁷

David Friedrich Strauss' work *Das Leben Jesu*, was highly controversial in the 1830's, not because it depicted the life of a historical Jesus, rationalists such as Paulus had already done that, but because of its radicalism. While many rationalists before him did argue away the supernatural content of the New Testament, they did not deny the historicity of it, or the status of Jesus Christ as an outstanding and singular teacher. With Strauss' argument that most of the content of New Testament was rather to be understood as *myths*, there was a bigger and more dangerous step taken in the rational-critical evaluation of Christianity.²⁸

Secondly, knowledge of Christianity and of religion in this work is tightly connected to a liberal ideology in a wider sense, which guided the work of the *Staatslexikon*. During this time liberalism was a very novel concept, and not as of yet tied up to political parties or limited to politics in a narrow sense. Instead, liberals believed that "they represented not simply the common good but also the forces of history which would insure the gradual triumph of enlightenment and freedom."²⁹

In this liberal ideology, Christianity, interpreted mainly in the direction of rationalism, is just one of the fields which need to be formed by freedom, reason and progress. The faith in these Enlightenment ideals is strong among the growing learned bourgeoisie, and liberalism is sometimes even interpreted as a *Bildungsreligion*, containing a strong belief in the improvement and scientification of all of life and society.³⁰ This may also be at least partly understood as such by the *Staatslexikon* authors themselves. In the preface to the first edition of *Staatslexikon*, Karl von Rotteck calls for a "political creed" of all liberals and supporters of constitutionalism, and admits that the main object of the *Staatslexikon* is to contribute to such a creed, and spread sound and correct political opinions to people.³¹

¹ This paper was originally intended for a cancelled workshop entitled "Religion and Science".

² Sigurd Hjelde, *Die Religionswissenschaft und das Christentum: eine historische Untersuchung über das Verhältnis von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*, Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1994.

³ Its complete title in English would be: "The State Lexicon, encyclopedia of the complete State sciences for all classes". Regarding language, the translations into English are my own.

⁴ See e.g. Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, 2.

⁵ Lucian Hölscher, "Religiöse Begriffsgeschichte: Zum Wandel der religiösen Semantik in Deutschland seit der Aufklärung," in *Europäische Religionsgeschichte: ein mehrfacher Pluralismus. Bd 2*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Jörg Rüpke, and Kocku von Stuckrad, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.

⁶ Andreas Buchner, "Religion," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 11*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1848, 473.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 474.

⁹ Gottlieb Christian Abt, "Atheismus," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 1*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1845, 755.

¹⁰ Ibid., 752; 754.

¹¹ Ibid., 755.

¹² Lucian Hölscher, "Semantic structures of religious change in modern Germany," in *The decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 194f.

¹³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1969 (1799). This argumentation is notably found in the second speech.

¹⁴ See e.g. Karl Theodor Welcker, "Christenthum," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 3*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1846, 230.

¹⁵ Karl Theodor Welcker, "Recht," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 11*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1848, 345.

¹⁶ Karl Theodor Welcker, "Moral," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 9*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1847, 179.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁸ Welcker, "Christenthum," 220-222.

¹⁹ Franz Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte im neunzehnten Jahrhundert. [Bd 8], Die protestantischen Kirchen in Deutschland*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965, ch. 6.

²⁰ "Heilige Schriften des neuen Testaments," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 6*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1847, 668.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 674.

²² Karl Theodor Welcker, "Obscurantismus," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 10*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1848.

²³ Welcker, "Christenthum," 235-36.

²⁴ Karl von Rotteck, "Aberglaube," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 1*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1845, 86-87.

²⁵ Schmetzer, "Religiöse und kirchliche Bewegungen in Deutschland," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 11*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1848, 483.

²⁶ Welcker writes that he had read them both, but that their theses did not shake his firm Christian belief. Karl Theodor Welcker, "Sittlichkeit," in *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie der sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften für alle Stände, Bd 12*, ed. Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker, Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1848, 205.

²⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1969 (1841). For a concise comparison with Schleiermacher, see the afterword by Karl Löwith in this edition.

²⁸ See e.g. Schnabel, *Die protestantischen Kirchen in Deutschland*, 290.

²⁹ James J. Sheehan, *German liberalism in the nineteenth century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 16. See also Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany*, 9.

³⁰ Hartmut Lehmann, "Ein europäischer Sonderweg in Sachen Religion," in *Europäische Religionsgeschichte: ein mehrfacher Pluralismus. Bd 1*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Jörg Rüpke, and Kocku von Stuckrad, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009, 49. The hard-translated German word *Bildung* combines features of education, formation and cultivation.

³¹ Karl von Rotteck, "Vorwort zur ersten Auflage." In *Das Staats-Lexikon: Encyklopädie Der Sämtlichen Staatswissenschaften Für Alle Stände, Bd 1*, edited by Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker. Altona: Vlg von J.F. Hammerich, 1845, xvi-xvii.