Research program Research Group “Religious individualization”

Religious individualization in historical perspective
International research group in the Max Weber Centre (Erfurt)

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Summary

In its first funding phase (Joas/Rüpke), the International Research Group (Kolleg-Forscherguppe, KFG) investigated historical processes of individualization in religion, with special reference to the consequences these processes have had for religious change. We were now able to confirm our main hypothesis that there is no across-the-board systematic link between religious individualization and modernization. In the second funding phase (Mulsow/Rüpke), four hypotheses arising out of this research will be the center of attention. (1) Religious individualization is not just a phenomenon specific to modern Europe but also a useful heuristic category for the study of historical processes in religions across very different cultures. (2) These processes of individualization should be understood less as isolated phenomena and more as reworkings of existing religious experiences, traditions, and discourses. Hence investigation of the history of individualization must also be an investigation of the history of interconnections that looks to the different ways in which cultural boundaries have been crossed. (3) Given that processes of religious individualization are closely connected to the formation of institutions and traditions, the interactions among them must be systematically examined. Individualization and deindividualization are always intertwined. Thus processes such as the formation of canons and traditions or the creation of different forms of fundamentalism can also be investigated in this context. (4) Historically, the concept of individualization has served as a tool for Eurocentrism and social exclusion in academic research. Similarly, the concept of religion has often turned the idea of a “collective” into an absolute value. By confronting the history of the study of religion, we can develop a concept of religion that takes account of these historical processes of individualization and interconnectedness while avoiding the pitfalls of Eurocentrism.

These hypotheses will be tested by engaging in three areas of research: (I) investigation into the interconnected processes of religious individualization, with a particular focus on (a) individual historical actors and (b) structural relationships of exchange and interaction across cultural and especially religious boundaries; (II) long-term effects of processes of religious individualization in the face of “deindividualizing” opposing forces and counterstrategies; and (III) development of new descriptive and analytical concepts and categories that take into consideration the history of religion and theology.
Hypotheses and Objectives

Discovering and documenting the many different processes of religious individualization from other times and places opens up a broad but neglected field for empirical research that places special weight on comparing and tracing the interactions between different religious and cultural traditions. Yet it also requires discussing the implications that this research has for social theory and the history of religion. Accordingly, in the requested second funding phase the following four hypotheses will be the central focus:

(1) Religious individualization is not just a phenomenon specific to modern Europe but also a useful heuristic category for the study of historical processes in religions across very different cultures. The second phase will continue research begun during the first phase by including further religions (Islam, Buddhism), regions (Western Asia, also areas in Europe such as the Iberian Peninsula), and time periods (with a heavier concentration on the early modern period). Using the perspective of individualization drawn from the modern West obviously involves applying a specifically European concept in unrelated contexts. Doing so is legitimate, however, as long as this perspective is accompanied by appropriate self-reflection and a critical approach to translation and terminology. This perspective should be treated as a heuristic that can be applied to diverse cultural and historical contexts, not a fixed definition.

Through uncovering other kinds of religious individualization originating in other places, we will thus be able to contextualize the kinds of individualizing processes that are more familiar to us and establish relationships among them with greater sensitivity. Such contextualization can also help bring out more clearly the particular character of the individualizing processes that Western societies have chosen.

(2) These processes of individualization should be understood less as isolated phenomena and more as reworkings of existing religious experiences, traditions, and discourses. Hence investigation of the history of individualization must also be an investigation of the history of interconnections that looks to the different ways in which cultural boundaries have been crossed.

By “history of interconnections” we mean an inquiry in the sense of an “entangled history,” which analyzes the reciprocal interactions and transfers between different cultures, regions, religions, and so on. Such an inquiry involves an increased focus on “boundary-crossing” interactions and exchanges, in which diverse cultural and religious traditions encounter one another and ideas and practices that strengthen or trigger individualization processes are transferred. In addition to the questions of how particular institutions (such as rights of religious groups) are implemented and how forgotten and cast aside practices (“confession”) and discourses (“prophecy”) are rediscovered, the question of possible interactions is especially exciting. Here one might think historically about interactions and interconnections that have been overlooked until now (such as Islamic thinkers’ interaction with mysticism in the High Middle Ages, Sunni and Shiite influences in Sufism, and the exchanges between Ismailis and Hindus in India). Migrations of ideas and their effects created complex interactions with consequences for religion well before the great breakdowns of tradition within and outside of Europe in the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this connection, the knowledge that KFG members have or can acquire in diverse periods and regions can be used to trace the vertical or “deep time” dimension of these processes of transformation. In the present and for the future, the increasing interaction and interconnection among cultural strands and trends of diverse origin amid intensified globalization is also striking.

(3) Given that processes of religious individualization are closely connected to the formation of institutions and traditions, the interactions among them must be systematically examined. Individualization and deindividualization are in many cases intertwined. Institutional protection of individual practices creates at the same time an awareness of the possibilities for heteropraxis or heterodoxy and the tools to counteract it through standardization. That in turn increases the power of dissent (and of the emphatic rejection of alternatives). Hence processes such as the creation of canons, traditions, or forms of fundamentalism can also be studied in the context of individualization processes. Religious individualization thus—provided it is not taken to mean a one-way path to modernization—designates contingent processes of exploration and of cultural or social grounding of personal religious search and articulation. These boundary crossings and feedback loops are processes inherent to reactions of individuals as well as to reactions that create communities or impose standardization at an institutional level. Furthermore, such deindividualization can not just constrain individuals but also create free spaces for individualization.

(4) In the history of theory, the concept of individualization has served as a Eurocentric strategy of exclusion. Likewise, the concept of religion has often turned the collective into an absolute value that has been attributed especially to pre-modern or non-European areas. Based on the KFG’s results and through confrontation with the history of scholarly research in this area, a concept of religion can be developed that makes it possible to reconstruct the study of religion in the context of historical processes of individualization and interconnectedness while avoiding the pitfalls of Eurocentrism.

The KFG is thus aiming at no less than a disciplinary-history-based redefinition of the prevailing concept of religion, which localizes religion in the collective, the institutional, and the standardized. This conception has shaped the choice of what has received analytical attention and concrete description as “religion” in treatments of the history of religions and has accordingly also decidedly influenced the portrayal of religion in other disciplines. Our operating assumption, based on our previous findings, is that a new concept that understands religion as an intrinsic reciprocal relating of individual and general (brokered by interconnections and processes of individualization and deindividualization) should take its place.

By starting with a concept of religious individualization that is sensitive to contingency and context, it should become possible to reorient the study of the history of religion toward a perspective that takes account of theories of individualization and entanglement. Substantive research and theoretical discussion thus stand in a close relationship of cross-referral. The starting point is not the nineteenth century. For the theoretical discussion, the focus on the history of interconnection—on the modern era in its totality (from its early phase in Europe and other regions of the world up through the
globalized present) and hence on their mutually intensifying intercultural, transcultural, interreligious, and transreligious exchange relationships—is of particular relevance.

Methodology

Our methodology draws on the experiences and construction of concepts from the first funding period as formulated in Hypothesis 1. It focuses on a concept of religious individualization that, as initially explained, can be understood as referring to processes that:

(a) at the level of practices and institutions, improve the individual’s opportunities for articulating religious experiences and forming a religious identity and broaden individual freedom of action and potential for individualized reconfiguration of religious traditions by institutional means; and

(b) at the level of discourse, encompass language in the relevant historical fields that values this process positively or actually requires it. Originally a key term in modernization theory, “individualization” has turned out to be extremely fruitful as a heuristic for determining what its own, historically contingent preconditions are; however, it requires—in a continuous hermeneutic process—empirical enrichment and systematic reflection drawing on competing as well as complementary concepts. The expansion of the perspective of individualization broached by our first hypothesis should thus be understood not as a Eurocentric fixed definition but instead as a way of posing a question that is directed at culturally and historically diverse contexts. Thus the uncovering of (religious) individualization processes of diverse types and origins—contrary to what has been envisaged up until now in “Western” conceptualizations and history of religions—and the question of the reciprocal dependencies of these processes allows for a more sensitive contextualization and working out of relationships among the individualization processes already familiar to us and can thereby also highlight more clearly the contingency of processes of individualization in modern Western societies. Modern developments in the “West” are not what creates the possibilities for religious and non-religious individualization or the forming of the self. In place of a linear individualization thesis, oscillating variety, contingency, typological diversity, and interweaving of (religious) individualizations should be emphasized.

The concept of religion, when used heuristically, should be differentiated in a similar fashion. For a grasp of the subject that looks at and compares religious individualizations from antiquity up to the present, from Western Europe to the west Asian and Indian region, from large-scale Christian organizations to contexts of religious pluralism to diffuse religiosity, from temple ritual to academic theology, it is necessary to have an accordingly broad concept of religion as a working tool. “Broad” does not, by the way, mean gathering together as many or as few as possible of the conventional topoi of definitions of religion. Rather, it means being able to include a wide range of phenomena from diverse cultures. Moreover, “religion,” as the object of comparison, must be newly defined in each case according to the changing motives for comparison. For the purposes of this project, the object “religion” is thus to be understood as a system of orientation that has a peculiar but always precarious status within the culture to which it belongs and that
– in its content, refers to some transcendental principle that often appears in the form of personal gods but also in different grades of the supernatural;
– communicates this orientation typically through a wide spectrum of media, in which ritual and specific (“holy”) objects and stories play a prominent role and in which various forms of systematization (“doctrine”) can appear;
– provides directions for action in the form both of norms of how to conduct one’s life and of worldviews and is understandable in its functioning and consequences only with reference to individual appropriation (and hence also modification) of these norms and worldviews in their actions and attitudes;
– can assume solidified institutional character in diverse forms, which can range from individual charismatic “providers” and their “clients” and “students” to “lay associations” and other membership concepts and religious elites which can set limits or open up maneuvering room for individual appropriations; and finally,
– in its concrete implementations constitutes a place of intensive interconnections across cultural, spatial, and temporal boundaries. The term “system of orientation” picks up in particular on the problem of defining the relationship between individual action and cultural groupings. In practice, this means considering the broad spectrum of different media of religious communication from the perspective of the history of individualization and interconnection.
Fields of Research for the years 2014 to 2017

The testing of Hypotheses 1 through 4 will take place over several fields of research that break down the temporal and spatial structure of the first funding period. Over and above the expansion of the object of study (Hypothesis 1), three main areas of research can be distinguished. They are briefly outlined here and then discussed in greater detail in what follows.

(I) Research on processes of religious individualization in different contexts, in a historical perspective, and with a focus on interactions will aid work on Hypothesis 2. This research will look especially at: (a) individual historical actors and (b) structural relations of exchange and interconnection, such as networks.

(II) Testing of Hypothesis 3 will be aided by investigation of the long-term effects of processes of religious individualization in the face of “deindividualizing” counterforces and and counterstrategies, which extend, as in (I), over a geographical range from Europe to India and over a timeframe beginning in the “Axial Age.”

(III) Hypothesis 4 requires working out new terms and categories for description and analysis, such as work on the concept of “religion” as a product of reflection based on the perspective of the history of religions and theology.

(I) Individualization and the Dynamics of Social Interaction

From the starting point of local contexts and specific forms of religious individualization, attention will be given to synchronic interconnections of actions and processes as well as to the diachronic transmission of practices and beliefs across the boundaries of different social groups and ways of life. The KFG’s broad expertise allows for work that ranges widely across both space and time. This expertise makes it possible to combine detailed historical and ethnographical studies and investigation of chronologically extended or geographically wide-ranging processes of transferral. From this research emerge reciprocal effects between micro- and macrophenomena, from religious idiosyncrasies of intellectual intermediaries, nonconformists, and long-distance travelers to processes of group formation that make use of forms of individuality. The projects to be undertaken under this heading can be assigned to the following two points of research emphasis:

(a) Historical actors in their intersubjective relations and their relationship to ideas and practices relevant to individualization: for Norbert Elias, migrating scholars of the Renaissance were the first people for whom processes of individualization can be observed. In fact, the KFG’s work has shown that such impulses are by no means to be seen only in Europe and in the early modern period, but also for ancient and medieval as well as non-European societies, for example in India. In the context of religion, such processes emerge above all when they coincide with phases of “religionization” (so Jörg Rüpke) or religious pluralization, as for example in the Roman imperial period and over broad stretches of the religious history of India. In the postclassical history of India,
individualization shows up in ever new forms and impulses, especially in the form of *samnyaya* and *bhakti* (thus Martin Fuchs). Demands for the religious individualization of the individual increase and the spectrum of forms of religious individualization broaden during certain phases and regions of the European Middle Ages and also during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Central Europe. In such phases one can investigate, for example for pre-modern Europe, “pluralized Exiles” (so Martin Mulsow) and correspondingly pluralized migrants, who could use their plural identities to increase their own options for religious action. These learned migrants are both products of interconnection and actors who push interconnection further, since they develop religious “syncretisms” and, by means of cultural “misunderstandings,” strengthen currents in other cultures that are similar albeit from completely different sources. The encounter between the Portuguese Jesuit Monserrate and the Moghul ruler Akbar described by S. Subramanyam provides an example in the context of cross-civilization circulation of millenarian ideas in the sixteenth century. Like other “marginal men,” they carry knowledge of their cultures of origin into other regions and manifest in such interconnections a special receptivity to foreign ideas.

The investigation of these special case groups, whose adherents are generally members of elites (sometimes also of subaltern classes: Nath Yogis, Sufis, Roman military personnel), permits—where the sources are available—the examination of questions that can otherwise scarcely be answered. Here the starting point can be the question of how experience of religious interconnection translates into individual activity. New research on the subjective perception of globalism in the pre-modern era (E. Rothschild) shows that awareness of large-scale dependencies can take very diverse forms. A distinction must be made, regarding both the activities and the perceptions of pre-modern “cosmopolitans” or “migrating actors,” between interconnection that has actually been put into effect and interconnection that has been only willed or intended (or its opposite: non-interconnectedness).

By differentiating among various phenomena of religious individualization—looking at cultic alternatives, competition among donors, and reflection in texts about forms of individuality—and by accepting that de-traditionalized behavior can oscillate between perfection and deviance (Rüpke), one can enrich the range of available descriptive terms considerably. One can also grasp more precisely which consciously perceived components of spatial and temporal reference to facts and ideas beyond a particular individual group or culture (in religious discussions or marked quotations in various media, for instance) had an effect on which form of individuality (for example, Akbar, Dara Shikoh, Ramakrishna, Keshab Sen, and Gandhi and even the Sai Babas). Conversely, other issues also come into view with this approach: which cases of actual interconnection were no longer perceived as phenomena of difference (for example, radical pietism that runs across religious confessions); and finally, which stereotypical defensive behaviors, such as religious apologetics, could actually reinforce religious interconnection despite intentions to the contrary.

Such complex questions can be deployed across numerous domains. Further work, concentrating only on migrating cosmopolitans but also, in complementary fashion, on nonconformists who remained in one place, promises especially fruitful results. In both
cases this first research area offers a grasp of individualizing processes that starts with well-documented individuals and their special forms of individualized religious practices and moves on from there to consider consequences, social diffusion, and discursive evaluation of “precarious” forms of religious practice and knowledge (Mulsow).

The sources thus reveal a broad spectrum, from religiously deviant individuals in central Europe (“Beguines,” “visionaries,” “hermeticists,” “spiritualists”) who were not always aware of the diverse transnational paths that their sources had taken, all the way to religious entrepreneurs including missionaries (such as the Jesuit missions in China, Japan, and India; since the nineteenth century also female missionaries), merchants, military personnel, and researchers across highly varied cultures, beginning with “Chaldeans,” “sorceresses,” “magi,” ancient astrologers, Indian ascetics, and Dalit poets, all the way up to Zen specialists in the style of E. Herrigel and D. T. Suzuki. Here the Islamic area since the Middle Ages will come into focus for the first time. Mobility and intercultural contacts have a mutual influence on one another. Several of the projects pursued during the first funding phase, for example on late-medieval European intellectuals and early modern princes as well as on the role of Indian and non-Indian intellectuals in twentieth-century Indian religious history, or on social radicalization in religious movements in the same area, are suggestive of the kind of investigation of the history of interconnection in both spatial and temporal depth that is intended.

(b) Structural relationships of exchange and interconnection across cultural and religious boundaries: the key term “Jesuits” points to the necessity of considering not only individual actors but also networks and interconnection regimes and their changes. By “interconnection regime” can be understood network structures in which particular structural and habitual conditions—principles, rules, norms, and expectations on both sides—make long-term interconnection possible. Examples of interconnection regimes include orders and missionary societies as well as imperial formations (the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Mogul Empire), in which religions, ethnic groups, and also particular officeholders interact. Attention should also be directed to the types of interaction and their individualizing effects. Processes of interconnection as well as isolated developments should be investigated across a geographical area ranging from Europe to South Asia, with Islam and western Asia serving as a bridge in both directions.

Strategies of group and network formation and reciprocal differentiation are also bound up with the reactions of contemporary “observers,” who conceptualize these facts in their capacities as philosophers, theologians, jurists, ethnographers, hagiographers, and historians in their respective textual genres (for example, “religious law,” “historiography”). Local and cross-regional networks are linked together and solidified; the classification of groups in the law provides both limits and a free space for groups’ particular activities; outsiders’ stereotypes of groups can be polemically rejected or, on the contrary, adopted and canonized as the groups’ own self-descriptions. For the history of individualization, this development receives special stress, on the one hand through its connection with traditions of self-reflection that have been present in philosophy and ethnography since antiquity (Poseidonius, Tacitus) and on the other hand through the individualization, shaped by mobility, of religious experience and through individuals’ adoption of foreign traditions (observable in mass movements among migrants as well as
in missionary orders). A special aspect of this investigation should entail gathering together and reconstructing ideas about self-concepts and dimensions and subjects of action that were developed in non-Western religious contexts and contrasting them with Western concepts. One special objective is a deeper understanding of Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu conceptions of (moral) action (karma theories). Their self-reflective scholastic debates suggest connections with Western sociological theories of action; social contact with karma shows a wide spectrum of individual strategies of tailoring and bracketing the concept of karma. These phenomena can thus be connected to the findings of the research area just discussed.

(II) Long-Term Effects of Processes of Religious Individualization and “Deindividualizing” Opposing Forces and Countertrends

According to Simmel, individualization is always accompanied by processes of institutionalization and standardization. Individualization thus has always also created the potential for deindividualization. The significance of this interplay for processes of religious individualization, as we have put it in our third hypothesis, is worth testing from a historical perspective. The most important types of “deindividualizing” counterforces might be said to be standardization, normalization, canonization, the development of dogma, and disciplining. In the late-antique Mediterranean, for example, the formation of diverse forms of religious individualism (from elective-membership groups to hermits) is associated in a reciprocal process with self-reinforcing tendencies toward normalization, whether in the criminal law of the Codex Theodosianus or in Talmudic texts; Eric Rebillard has made a fundamental contribution to this topic through his book, which originated in the KFG, and in the discussions that followed on his work. Throughout this period, religious communities pressed, through their conduct and their stated commitments, for appropriate conduct from group members. In light of the significance that—especially since the Enlightenment—has been attributed to law as a means of individualization, law and religious law in particular (and their comparable law-forming institutions) appear to be an especially interesting object of research. Such processes of deindividualization can be observed in various configurations. Paradoxically, the increase in the number of religious options and in the institutional protection of plural models leads both to the availability of alternatives and choices and to uniformity-imposing processes of confessionalization; subsequently, religions can provide intentional criticism of individualization to the point of fundamentalism. In addition, it must always be kept in mind that an individual’s decision not to exercise certain options, or an individual’s making of decisions that have the effect of reducing further options, constitutes a necessary part of one’s lifestyle and hence also individualization. As a phenomenological matter, this fundamentally different form of deindividualization can in many cases be distinguished only with difficulty from the processes that are central here; in Romantic-period critiques, this distinction is in fact consciously rejected. Here too, the interconnection-oriented approach yet again broadens the spectrum of questions. In cultural interrelations there is a broad social tendency to legitimize, standardize, and institutionalize whatever is the product of interconnections, so that it can be passed down to the next generation as an organic unity. The product of interconnection turns into institutional homogeneity. For the question of the connection between religious
individualization and deindividualization, one must also examine the long-term transmission of religious “currents” and ideas in this dual process of interconnection and hiding of interconnectedness. This transmission involves longue durée processes of an extent that can transcend the limits of a local community or that may even be transcultural. Given that religions take care to legitimize themselves through their traditionalism, one must look into the significance of interconnection or deconnection or as the case may be the significance of the supposed refusal to allow interconnection in the transmission of specific kinds of content, for example in reference to Jewish elements in “Christian” traditional concepts (the Sabbath, “Israel”) or “Western” elements in Orthodox churches. These macrosociological questions seek to explore the extent to which “nonconformity” is possible in each case (and for which particular social classes) and to understand the circumstances in which religious individualization turns into a kind of standardization.

An interesting case for investigation would be, for example, to compare women from the senatorial class (Matronae) in late antiquity who were implicated in certain institutional contexts with the situation of “non-Matronae,” especially in the creation of new cults. On the issue of conformist forms of individualization, the example of early modern Jewish women and Musar literature (an often popularizing form of Jewish moral literature) can also be adduced: religious instructional literature from the early modern period offers an example of the individual use of religious/ethical indoctrination. In European Jewish culture, Musar literature, especially the literature written in the vernacular (i.e., in Yiddish), played a significant role in individual education by giving laypersons—and here it would be worth looking once again at the relevance of gender—a resource for the individualized (albeit almost always orthodox) formation of the self. A thorough investigation of the use of Musar literature in diaries of early modern Jews, men and women (Glückel von Hameln is here the most famous example) promises important insights for understanding what space for individual religious formation was available for non-specialists.

Furthermore, “individualization” always raises the question of how boundaries are demarcated. “Religions” themselves turn out to be a central ingredient in these developments. Religions appear in this context as solidifying nexuses of religious practices and convictions—“syncretisms” in the original sense of the term—that create community and draw outward boundaries. Religious pluralism in societies can also safeguard religious practices and convictions of minorities as stable religious options. Such boundary drawing can be observed in the context of confessionalization in early modern Europe as well as in India.

(III) Fundamental Research and Development of Conceptual Terminology in the History of Religions and Theology

In addition to formulating new conceptual terminology for Research Field I, as required by Hypothesis I, we think it is essential, in light of the results of our research up until now, to conduct an investigation into the history of ideas and disciplines in conjunction with the work for the second research phase that is described above. According to our fourth thesis, the terms “individualization” and “religion” contain an
implicit agenda that often associates Europe with secularized modernity and religion with collectivity (thus implying that it is unsuited to modernization).

How can we get a handle on this agenda? Narratives from both outsider and insider perspectives provide an area for research in which the assumptions made about the historical dimension of collectivity and individuality in religion need to be clarified. In certain cases of religious individualization, historical narratives have constituted an important means for individuals and religious groups—who have used them as tools of both inclusion and exclusion—to construct their identities. Autobiographical texts have frequently been investigated in this way. But historiography has also provided, since antiquity, an important opportunity for emphasizing the religious individuality of the people described or for opening up religious space for the author himself. The strategies of these authors also reflect the complexity and paradoxical character of the processes that we are investigating, as stressed in the discussion of Research Fields I and II. “Confessionalizing processes” (already in the period from the third to sixth centuries over the entire Mediterranean region) give rise to narratives about “Jews,” “pagans,” “Christians,” and “Manicheans” as both typical actors and driving forces of religious change. Such narratives open up a perspective on multifaceted interactions; at the same time, however, they also cement group boundaries that are the objects of fierce controversy and varied efforts on the part of religious organizations to impose closed group identities but that are by no means given (Rebillard). Complaints about a lack of clarity in religious identity are historically widespread, in later periods even among closed-membership religious groups; take the example of complaints about “Christian” or “Jewish” participants in “pagan” festivals.

During the late Enlightenment (what Reinhart Koselleck called the “saddle time”), certain key concepts in the history of ideas (“piety,” “culture,” “future,” and even “religion”) experienced a change in meaning amid the social upheavals of the period. Together with changes in the historical understanding of time came a renewed historicization of religion and a development of diverse, individualized religious cults and movements. In this context, religious actors became more self-reflective and came to be shaped by processes of religious individualization. This process also affected the ways of representing religions, which had undergone intensive development during the early modern period. The KFG’s work is a part of this trend within the history of the disciplines. The use of “historical perspectives,” characteristic of the KFG’s research, to understand the relationship between religion and the individual is itself part of a historicizing process in religion(s). Examining Christianity as the key catalyst of religious individualization makes it possible to grasp the role of other religions, such as Judaism (even though it traditionally emphasizes the community rather than the individual), as contexts for processes of religious individualization. At the same time, this inquiry makes the importance of religion in social processes clearly recognizable: across different historical periods and cultural regions, the area of “religion” has been a privileged locus for individualizing processes. Thus the predominant view (even in the social sciences) of the primarily collective character of religions, especially “pre-modern” and non-Christian ones, can be corrected. In addition to its historical and phenomenological work on individuality and its significance for the reconstruction of a history of religion that is not Europe- or modernity-centric, the KFG is hence conducting basic research in the history
of the disciplines and of historiography. The central question is what influence implicit (or in more recent research explicit) assumptions about individualizing processes and the degrees of individualization in different cultures have had on the formulation of concepts in the study of religion and sociology and on the reconstruction of the history of religion since the early modern period. This question is directed, for example, toward the historiography on the Reformation and on early Christian heresies, but also toward the historiography of non-European religions. We hypothesize that the concept of religion itself will need to undergo a thoroughgoing revision.

In the area of the history of religion, the KFG is seeking to achieve greater certainty in terminology. Contrary to the usual practice, we are looking for the first appearance of historical writing about religion not in nineteenth-century historicism but instead already in the era of the first expansion of European empires and post-Reformation confessionalization (Mulsow). Our questions go in two opposite directions. On the one hand, we are examining assumptions about the collective character of religion reflected in such concepts as “religion” and “cults” and their construction as collective agents as well as in the terms “ritual,” “belief,” and “doctrine.” Phenomena and concepts such as “mystic,” “experience,” and “magic,” on the other hand, have often been described not in connection with their individualizing potential but instead as “irrational” and a kind of deindividualizing manipulation. These issues open up important areas of research for the KFG. One might ask: how has the “scholarly” engagement with religion shaped the framing of contemporary questions about modernization, individualization, and secularization in religions (even before the nineteenth century)? Even at this level of discourse, interconnection has always played a role. The Chinese Rites controversy during the late seventeenth century, for example, dealt with the limits of appropriation from foreign religions (Mungello); the reception of the Upanishads in Europe around 1800 was marked by (to some extent paradoxical) historical accidents (with references that point to Neoplatonic readings in the translation of texts into Persian under the Mogul Empire as observed by App). European expansion during the colonial era and historical examples of shared religious history are thus superimposed on one another. This context makes clear how a focus on interconnection can be a revealing approach: the role of religious individualization in various contingent developments in the history of the disciplines still needs to be clarified.

At the same time, this field of research also takes advantage of the relevant expertise of the organizers. That expertise makes it possible to deal in the second working phase with the aspects of our research topic that relate to the history of the disciplines and the history of religion in a way that goes beyond what was specified in the action plan for the first funding application. The composition of the group as a whole also facilitates the inclusion of the field of the history of theology within the scope of the KFG’s work. Here the task is to identify theological reflections of “Modernity” and “Anti-Modernity” that relate to individualization and to check them against analogous assumptions about the history of individualization. Previous conferences held by the KFG, for example on the theology of Meister Eckhart and the theologies of religious movements in the European Middle Ages, on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian dogma, and on the religious upheaval in the 1960s in Europe, have shown that “spirituality” and “religion” turn out to be not only period-specific buzzwords but also indicia of a development of terminology.
that actors interpret in light of the theories of individualization and modernization. The appropriation and normative force of lived religious forms can be oriented around the distinction, introduced by Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, between religiositas and religion: the individual’s use, whether consciously sought out or rejected, of the relationship of existence and religion to him- or herself, when understood in these conceptual terms, corresponds to the traceable historical functions of and changes in religion(s)—an inevitable challenge for the individual subject that also has a place in theories of the self. Unlike the questions in Research Field I, this area of research has been devised in such a way so as to concentrate on the research traditions of the “société des lettres” of central, northern, and southwestern Europe, staying conscious of particularities while also giving due attention to the global significance of this subject of research.

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