

No 7, 2007. Historicism and Antihistoricism in the Study of Religions**Editors: Philip Vanhaelemeersch, Bogdan Neagota**

In common parlance, "history of religion" is synonymous with "study of religion". The term was adapted by scholars of religion to set their field apart from that of the theologians. First in the Protestant world, and later in Catholicism, history of religion arose as the emancipation of the Western human mind from the tutelage of theology.

But how about the term of "history of religion" itself? To some extent, "history of religion" is a contradiction in terms. "History" studies the unique and the one-off; in contrast, religion is concerned with what is eternal and unchangeable. "History of religion" thus seems to force together two realms of reality and two ways of knowing that are incompatible. If we study a myth or ritual as a mere historical phenomenon we lose sight of its religious value. If we study them merely in what makes them religious, we must first detach them from history.

Objections of this kind were first addressed by Italian idealist philosophy in the early 20th century in a philosophy called *storicismo* (Croce) or historicism in English. However, "historicism" has many faces. Sometimes – as for Croce – it refers to a philosophy which sees all reality as a product of the human mind (in the same way as a historian reconstructs the past). In another understanding, "historicism" refers to a form of positivist view of the past.

In this latter understanding, the historian of religion studies religious phenomena as sterile historical facts, between which one can establish causal links. Both ways of thinking are called historicism, yet refer to two completely different things.

This confusion has persisted in the study of religion to the present day. Among scholars of religion "historicism" has both positive and negative connotations. Sometimes scholars of religion are credited for being historicist; at other times they are blamed for being historicist.

In this issue of Orma we look at the use and abuse of the historicist discourse in the study of religion. What does "historicism" actually mean? Where does the struggle with theology come in (Italian historicists speak about "metahistory", denoting the last remnant of theologising discourse)? And do we still need to bother about "historicism" or has the struggle against historicism become itself a struggle against idols?