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## Introduction: Rationalization in Religions

Philosopher Carl Friedrich Gethmann, a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy, has described rationalization as the “targeted, structured and reproducible operation of optimization.”<sup>1</sup> Gethmann’s broad definition covers rationalization across a range of very different areas – in the economy, in society, even in the mind of the individual. In our own field of religious studies, the first scholar who comes to mind in this context is the philosopher and sociologist Max Weber, who introduced the term “rationalization” to the field.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining that religious rationalization preceded social rationalization, Weber identified rationalization structures within the Judeo-Christian tradition that, as Gethmann puts it, “encouraged the establishment of rational conceptions of the world and the emergence of a modern consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> In his studies of the “economic ethics of the world religions,” Weber developed the notion of a universal historical process of “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*<sup>4</sup>) of the religious-metaphysical conceptions of the world and argued for a “unidirectional rationalization of all world religions.” According to Weber, all paths of religious rationalization lead towards an understanding of the world that is purified of magical notions. Only the occidental path of development, however, leads to a fully decentralized understanding of the world.<sup>5</sup>

It is not my intention, at this juncture, to provide a full recapitulation of Weber’s view of the rationalization that is inherent in all world religions. His basic assumptions concerning an occidental rationalism, and thus a particularly marked rationalism in the occidental religions, which he set against the Orient and its religions,<sup>6</sup> appear highly problematic to us today. In view of the obvious problems in Weber’s conceptualization, I believe it makes more sense, in talking about “rationalization in religions,” to stick with Gethmann’s definition of rationalization and to speak of an optimization of the “rationality” of religion. But what is rationality? I turn again to Gethmann, who defines “rationality” as “developing processes for the discursive upholding of claims to validity, to follow these and to

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1 Gethmann 1995a:463. The following introductory remarks are based on the greetings I delivered as Vice President of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy to the participants in the Berlin conference on “Rationalization in Religions” on which this volume is based.

2 Schluchter 2016:22–42, 127–261.

3 Gethmann 1995a:463.

4 Weber 1994:22 and 2001:273; cf. also Joas 2017:201–277 and Schluchter 2009:1–17.

5 Habermas 1981.

6 Weber 1984:9–11; cf. Schluchter 2016:192–196.

avail of them.”<sup>7</sup> A religion becomes rationalized when its exponents argue discursively – that is, in line with contemporary standards of rationality – in favor of its claims to validity, and when those claims to validity can be asserted in this way, instead of authoritatively and using instruments of power.

Notwithstanding our criticism of Weber, we are left with the question of whether such a tendency is actually inherent in all world religions, and whether this development intensifies over time. The conference on which the present volume is based set out to address this question, focusing mainly on Judaism, Christianity and Islam, aside from Shaul Shaked’s treatment of Zoroastrianism. Many of the papers focus specifically on the formative periods in which these three religions (sometimes referred to as “Abrahamic”) came into contact with the “cultures of rationality” that surrounded them, leading them to develop independent philosophies, theologies or at least argumentations with the pagan culture of rationality on the basis of their respective Holy Scriptures.

To an extent, Berlin can be described as a hot spot for this kind of research into the formative periods of the Abrahamic faiths. In the area of Judaism, for example, one could mention the studies of Peter Schäfer of Berlin (and Princeton), who convened several conferences, the results of which have since been published, to examine the relationships between the Greco-Roman culture of rationality and the large corpuses of rabbinic literature.<sup>8</sup> Regarding Islam, we might point to the Berlin research of Islamic studies scholar Sabine Schmidtke, also of (Berlin and) Princeton, whose paper “Rediscovering Theological Rationalism in the Medieval World of Islam”<sup>9</sup> was part of a larger project funded by the European Research Council – the groundwork for which, however, was laid down by several research groups at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies, to which our Jerusalem colleagues, such as Sarah Stroumsa, made a considerable contribution.<sup>10</sup> In the area of Early Christianity, we may note the studies of the reception of the Alexandrian culture of knowledge, and especially of (neo)Platonic philosophy, among Alexandrian Christians such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen; this work, too, has taken place in Berlin, within the circle surrounding the edition of the works of these Early Christian thinkers, in particular at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy, but of course not only there.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gethmann 1995b:468. For a different way of understanding the term, see Schluchter 2015:519–525.

<sup>8</sup> Schäfer 1998–2002.

<sup>9</sup> For details and a bibliography (including open-access publications) see: [https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/88937\\_en.html](https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/88937_en.html) (accessed May 5, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See Schmidtke et al. 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See Marksches 2007.

A number of efforts have recently been made to analyze and compare these attempts – facilitated by the continued existence in Late Antiquity of a culture of knowledge with shared standards of rationality – to integrate a culture of knowledge and rationality into the respective religions; worth mentioning here, for example, are the publications of Guy Stroumsa.<sup>12</sup> These comparative approaches are, of course, still in their nascent stages, with studies of “rationalization in religions” generally limited to one of the three – Judaism, Christianity or Islam – not to mention certain limitations in their perspectives (for example, because of the way reception has developed in modern times, the significance of Platonism has been afforded more attention than that of the Stoic tradition).

An earlier collaborative effort to examine “Religion and Rationality” was undertaken at a conference with that title held in Berlin in 2009.<sup>13</sup> That conference took a closer look at the relationship between scripture and rationalization – that is, between normative texts and efforts to adapt reflective work on them to contemporary standards of rationality. The colloquium’s thesis was that interpretation, particularly in the form of scientific commentaries, is a literary medium and institutional method for approaching holy texts that makes it possible to arrive at rationalizations in accord with a methodically controlled procedure. The colloquium took a very broad comparative approach, classifying Marxist texts alongside ancient oriental ones as “Scriptures” in the terms of a phenomenological approach to religion. The question already arose there as to whether a phenomenological comparison of the possibly differing potentials of religions to rationalize their traditions, and of their possibly differing strategies, would have to look not only at interpreting Holy Scriptures but also at theological reflections that are not presented in the form of commentary.

While we might tremble today to sketch broad outlines and model clear structures like those proposed by Weber, perhaps we can nevertheless create a list of criteria to outline how rationalization might be practiced by those actively involved in religions (such as religious experts or theologians). I would like to mention a few questions that might be helpful in this regard:

- What factors promote/impede rationalization?
- From where are the criteria for rationalization drawn, and how are they applied?
- In what institutions does rationalization take place, and where is it critiqued?

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<sup>12</sup> See G. Stroumsa 2013.

<sup>13</sup> For the papers presented there, see Kablitz and Marksches 2013. We are indebted to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for its part in funding both that conference and the one on which this volume is based.

- What circles of proponents propagate, support and utilize rationalization?
- Does the friction between clergy and other theologians that is so characteristic of Christianity exist in other religions as well?

The papers presented herein offer a historical perspective on these and other questions, along with some answers.

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