

# From 'law' to 'religion'

July 5 2012

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In the international journal *Religion*, the Islamicist Stefan Reichmuth and the Latinist Reinhold Gleis have published a joint paper on the concept of religion in the Koran. The RUB researchers show how, in Latin translations of the Koran, the religious notion changes – from "law" to "religion". The surprising finding: since the Middle Ages, the confrontation with the Islamic religious notion has constantly accompanied and possibly even promoted this change in Europe.

In their detailed philological study, the two scientists started by examining the origins of the Koranic term "dīn" which is used in this holy book with an older meaning as "law, judgment" (in the phrase "yaum ad dīn" – "Judgment Day" ) and a more recent meaning as "religion". The former evidently goes back to Christian-Jewish, and the latter no doubt to Iranian role models. The double meaning is reflected in the Latin translations of the Koran from the 12th to 17th Century which initially translate "dīn" with "lex" (law) or "iudicium" (court), and later with "religio".

At many points in the Koran, "dīn" is understood in the sense of a natural religious inclination which God has given to man. This religious "primary feeling" ("Urgefühl") that all people have is then guided by God along the right path, so to speak, by furnishing people with certain revelations: the Torah, Gospels, and finally the Koran. The last of these revelations which was received by the Prophet Muhammad is the "religion of truth" ("dīn al-haqq"). However, the general concept definitely remains intact.

In Latin too, there was already a general philosophical concept of religion in the first century BC (Lucretius, Cicero), which later Christian writers, however, likewise focused entirely on the "true religion" of Christianity. In the Christian (Latin) tradition, in contrast, there is only a gradually movement away from the understanding of Islam as a mere collection of laws and regulations. The German cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) was the first to describe Islam as - albeit false – "religion" and thus, in principle, put it on a par with Judaism and Christianity. In his wake, later translations of the Koran proceeded to translate the term "dīn" more frequently with "religio", thus doing more justice to the meaning of the Koran. This was consistently continued in the 17th Century by the Italian scholar Marracci, whose translation generally established itself in Europe.

In the philosophy of the Enlightenment, we finally come to consider the various religions (especially the three religions based on Abraham), as just different configurations of the same primal religion or of the same primary religious feeling, the "religiosity" of the people. "The reception of the Koranic concept of religion through the Latin translations, and the influential image of Islam presented by Nicholas of Cusa provide an early example for this conceptual development, which links in with Latin and Oriental role models of late antiquity, and which determined the modern understanding of [religion](#) to a large extent" say Prof. Gleis and Prof. Reichmuth.

**More information:** R. Gleis, S. Reichmuth: Religion between Last Judgement, law and faith: Koranic dīn and its rendering in Latin translations of the Koran, in: *Religion* 42, No. 2, 2012, 247-271.

Provided by Ruhr-Universität-Bochum

Citation: From 'law' to 'religion' (2012, July 5) retrieved 2 May 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2012-07-law-religion.html>

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