Volkhard Krech

Introduction to the annual KHK conference "Modes and Models of Religious Attraction. Part II: Knowledge and Action" (July 25-28 2011)

It is my task and pleasure to give an introduction to the topic of the conference, namely "Modes and Models of Religious Attraction. Part II: Knowledge and Action".

Religious Studies has been facing a host of challenges for some time now; let me name the following examples explicitly:

- First, deconstructivist insights have made it clear that it is not possible to speak of religious traditions such as "Christianity" or "Buddhism" as single, clearly-defined entities or even monolithic blocks. However, certain entities structure the reality of religious history. The difficulty of clearly distinguishing different traditions from each other is one that research on religion shares with cultural studies in general. Just as it is not easy to describe individual, distinct formations, there is also the issue of how one can analyse cultural transfer in general and religious transfer in particular.

- Second, research on religion, whether from a historical or present-day perspective, has lost sight of its subject due to epistemological considerations as well as post-colonial studies. If one does not wish to advocate scientism and only adopt a Western-modern perspective, it is difficult to identify "religion" in empiricism.

- Third, it is true that there has been reflection on the concept of religion for a long time in the field of Religious Studies. However the question of "*the*" history of religions – of its unity within the different processes taking place at different times – i.e. the question of what constitutes the religious field (in the meaning of Pierre Bourdieu) in time and space and what holds it together in its innermost core, is condemned to the margins. Admittedly, there is no lack of grand "history of religions" blueprints. But they tend to lag behind the state of research in transcultural studies empirically and methodologically. The approaches of *cultural flow* and those of an *entangled* and *global history* should be mentioned in particular here.

- Furthermore, Religion does not exist as such, but comes into existence by religious entities taking place in time and space, by taking place locally and at a certain time. That is why the topic of "religion and space" is so important, as – among others – Kim Knott has shown. The task for Religious Studies is to localize religion and to scale down abstract concepts.

- And last but not least, the investigation on the history of religions – like in any historical study – has to balance perspectives on both process *and* structure as well as change *and* continuation (maintanance).

Scholars in Religious Studies such as Timothy Fitzgerald and Russell T. McCutcheon, who deconstruct any notion of religion and argue that religion is mainly a scientific fiction, remind us of having lost ground. It seems as if we are not able to establish correspondencies between scientific conceptualization and empiricism. But this does not mean that there is no religion in practice. We perhaps have to re-calibrate and re-standardize our scientific tools to discover religion at work. Calibrating and standardizing is farmost the empirical endeaver of case studies, instructed by a few hypothetical assumptions. And the case is not something that lies *behind* the empirical material, but within it. This is the consequence of any background independent theory which – according to the conviction of many of us in the KHK – is the only way to theorize in a post-metaphysical era.

Especially with regard to the two issues mentioned at last, the concept of attractors and attraction might perhaps be helpful. Steming from chaos theory and the theory of dynamic systems in physics and biology, the concept has been already introduced and tested in areas beyond the natural sciences such as psychology, sociology, and economics.


An attractor

- describes a complex, but directed circulation
  (= no simple causality),

- is both more and less than an aggregat of its
  circulating elements
  (= beyond the distinction between the part and the whole),

- is constituted by those entities which at the same time are influenced by it (= recursivity),

- constitues and combinates space and time (= relativity).

In general, an attractor with its phase space and trajectories describes a complex, but directed circulation. However, there is no simple causality. It consists of elements that get close enough and remain close to each other even if more or less slightly disturbed by other forces. An attractor is not an entity as such, but consists of several elements that are forced to behave and act through attachments.

Thus, an attractor is not just an aggregat of its circulating elements, but both more and less; it is more than the sum of its elements due to the mutual forces between them; and it is less than the sum of its elements, because each element is more complex than just tracing the attractor. The Aristotalean distinction between the part and the whole does not seem to work here.

An attractor is built up of enacted alliances that in turn have effects on its elements. Thus, it is a recursive constellation in progress: an attractor is constituted by those entities which at the same time are influenced by it. It is both result and force of attachments. However, once an attractor has come into existence, the process of directed circulation within an attractor seems to be prior to the meaning of its elements. Content follows form, just as semantics follows syntactical arrangements. The position of an entitiy in an attractor, which provides it with meaning, depends on the attachments to other entities.

Directed circulation is the metaphor that combines process and form as well as time and space. Like a dynamical system is a rule for *time* evolution on a state *space*, an attractor constitues and combines time and space as known from the theory of relativity.
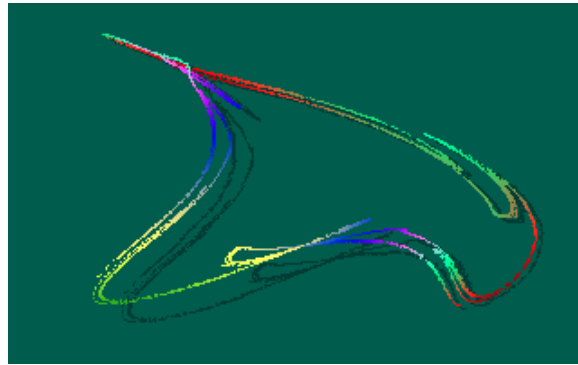

This image tries to illustrate the connection between time, space and recursivity.

Within circulations entities get a postion in relation to other entities which have effects on each other. At the same time the circulation in the shape of an attractor is the result of the various attachments. We are used to call this mutual influence inter-action – this is the translation of the German term *Wechselwirkung* (as far as I know, the term interaction has been introduced by Robert E. Park who translated Georg Simmel's notion of Wechselwirkung as interaction. Perhaps, reciprocal effect or inter-agency would be a better translation). Within a circulation entities do not just exist, they are not to be understood essentially, but are brought into a semiotic existence by attachments. Attachments define attributs of entities and make them concrete and individualized.

Due to mutual effects we might call those entities *actants*, a term that has been coined by the scholar of semiotics Julien Greimas and later was taken up by Bruno Latour in order to denote human and non-human actors. Actants in a web take the shape that they do by virtue of their relations with one another. The concept of actants suggests that there is no difference in the ability of technology, cultural artefacts, humans, animals, or other non-humans (such as supernatural beings) to act, and that there are only enacted alliances. Thus, the interagencies of actants *may* include, but are not restricted to motives, intentions, goals, etc. They primarily refer to attachments of mutal effects.

E.g., individuals, currents, groups, organizations, words, places, concepts, texts, images and other cultural artefacts can be actants, whenever they engage in a web of attachments and have effects. In this perspective also gods as well as other supernatural beings and entities like a supernatural power can be actants, if they get associated with other existing entities and have effects.

If taken to its logical conclusion, nearly any actant can be considered merely a sum of other actants. This is known as punctualisation in which actants become hubs or nodes within a web of attachments.
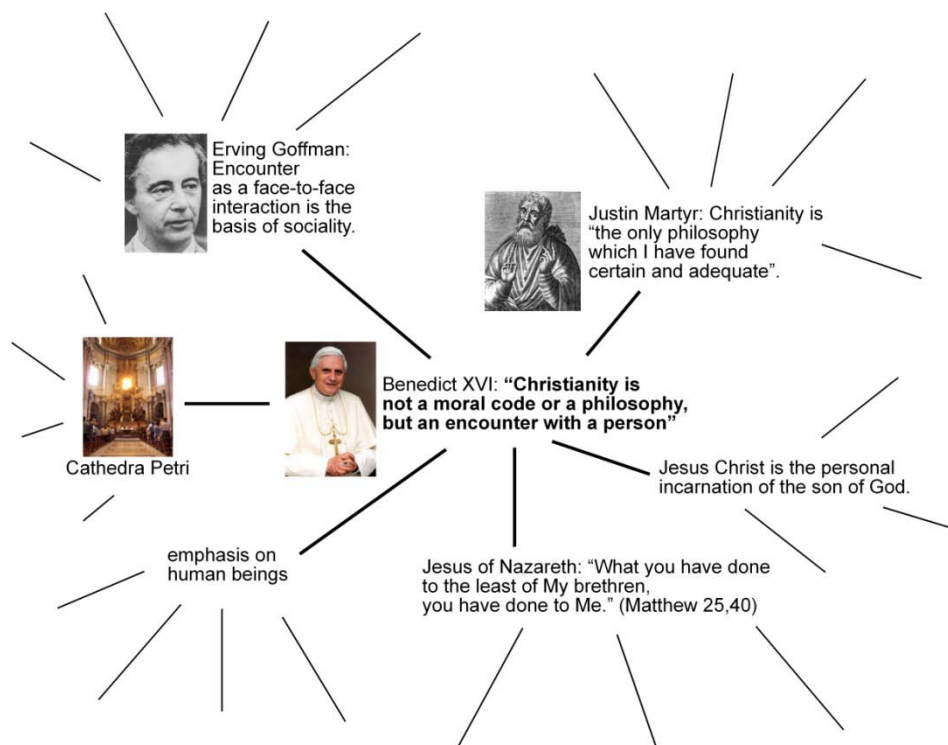
If, for instance, Benedict XVI says: "Christianity is not a moral code or a philosophy, but an encounter with a person", this speeach act is a punctualisation, because it is related to many other actants in time and space: e.g.,

- to the institution of the pope denoted in the Cathedra Petri, which "allows" or even "forces" Joseph Ratzinger to define Christianity (thus, it works as an actant),
- furhermore to other propositions which claim Christianity to be a moral code or a philosophy,
- to the concept of what the sociologist Erving Goffman calls encounter in the sense of a face-to-face-interaction as the basis of sociality,
- to the belief that Jesus Christ is the personal incarnation of the son of God,
- to the emphasis of what is considered as a human being (legally formed, for instance, in the human rights),

- to the proposition of Jesus of Nazareth in the gospel of Matthew: "What you have done to the least of My brethren, you have done to Me.", and so on.

According to Bruno Latour and several semiotic approaches, all these related actants represent processes of translation and transformation within the ongoing process of interpretation.

Pseudoscience:	Religion:
	Meister Eckhart: "God is the infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, whose circumference nowhere."
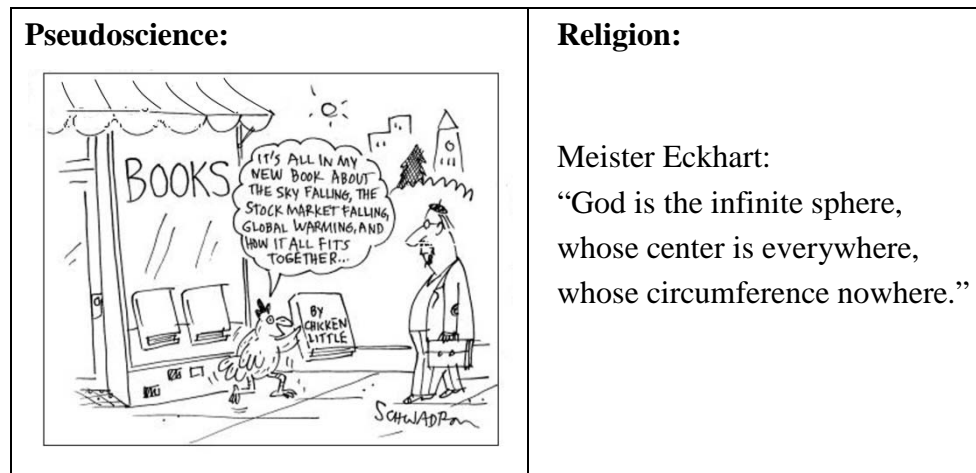
This perspective however could lead to the non-scientific assumption that everything is connected with everything. If, e.g., a colleague – like the little chickien in this cartoon – says: "It's all in my new book about the sky falling, the stock market falling, global warming, and how it all fits together", the book is not a scientific one, whereas the proposition of Meister Eckhart: "God is the infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, whose circumference nowhere" has a religious meaning. For Social Sciences and the Humanities in general and for Religious Studies in particular there must be a solution beyond the alternative of either fixed concepts or the assumption of everything being in flux of mutual dependence.

The model of attractors might help to find a way out of this dilemma. It is only meant as a metaphoric model, but what do we have and need more than metaphors to familiarize us with reality? If it works – and this is besides a few hypothetical assumptions foremost an empirical question –, the model of attractors could be a tool to describe *how* densified religious traditions come into existence, how they become a set of calibrated and stabilized forms to generate and express a certain content

- through internal directed relations between its elements,

- through connections with other religious traditions

- and through interagencies with other societal fields such as politics, economics, art and so on.

Since any entity – be it a word, a speech act, a text, a concept, an image, an individual, a group, an organization, a natural or an artificial object – is considered as being influenced by others and thus is a punctualisation of many other entities and at the same time having impacts on other entities, it might be regarded as either effected by an attractor or as an attractor itself. The difference lies in the relative amount and strength of its attachments. In both cases we have to discover and follow the traces of attraction that are inscripted in the respective entity.

The danger of an esoteric holism can be avoided if we consider the following:

- First, within the ongoing semiotic process attractors lead to the difference between effective attachments of entities in difference to weak and negligible ties.

- Second, we have to consider the free space between and beyond relations. Outside the web of attachments lies both nothing and much more. Nothing, because something comes into existence only through getting attached with other entities, and much more, because there is an infinite amount of potential entities that *might* come into existence through attachments. To quote Bruno Latour: "The world is not a solid continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms."

How can entities get a punctualisation of many others? And how are they directed by a certain circulation? The answer to these questions can hardly be given just by theoretical means, but only by empirical research. I am sure that there cannot be theoretical laws or fixed rules, but only specific ways to be discovered how attractors structure forms and influence the meaning of those entities which are affected by them.

In order to be open-minded to empiricism, only a few hypothetical assumptions should be made:

- First, due to circulation an attractor is recursive. It establishes effective attachments and is a result of the relations at the same time,

- and second, the circulation must leave traces of the attractor within those entities that are influenced by it, above all the attractor's recursivity.
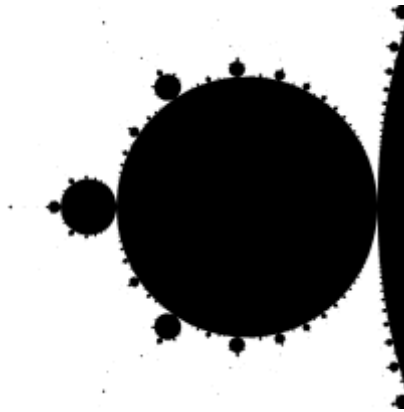
I am not shure, but perhaps the latter assumption might be compared with Mandelbrot's fractal which is "a rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole,"[1] a property called self-similarity, quasi self-similarity, or self-affinity which can be deterministic or stochastic.

The more attachments an entity within an attractor has, the more the principle of self-affinity might be realized.
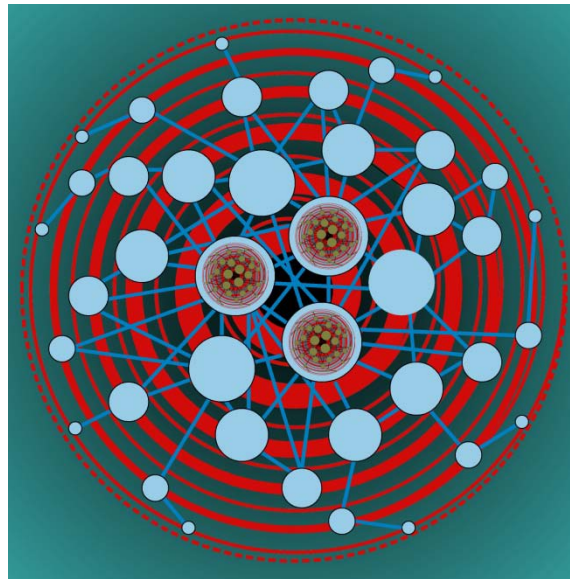
Whether or not the principle of approximate self-similarity or self-affinity is true for atractors, in any case the distinction between micro, meso and macro or big, medium and small as well as between concret and abstract might be missleading.[2] We should rather speak of strong and weak relations of mutual effects or strong and weak ties like

---

[1] Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, San Francisco 1982.

[2] Probably also the difference between center and periphery.

it is the case with a net with differently sized nodes that connect different amounts of lines.

In the discussions of the KHK the question arised how to identify *regularities* within the densification processes through attractors without constructing a historical teleology and determinism. I would like to remind us of the assumption that the attractor concept *may* include intentions of single or collective actors, but that it is not restricted to them. With regard to religious history traditions are not only or mostly not the result of planned activities. Knut Stünkel therefore suggested to use Karl Popper's theory of propensities. This theory defines the probability of events *formally* in order to identify regularities beyond intentionality. The probability of an event does not relate to a homogenous field of possibilities. Therefore the idea, that the probabilities of the different possibilities are equal, is false. There are rather objective tendencies to adopt a certain state instead, i.e. there are *definite directed possibilities*. That is why the graphic shown combines trajectories of concentric circles with a spiral.

Following the logic of the concept of "dynamics in the history of religions", it seems to make sense to decide against a simplistic subject-object or sender-receiver pattern, and instead to focus attention on dynamic impacts of attractors.
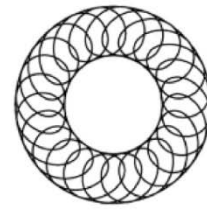
Attractors are to be considered as certain constellations of a semiotic process with immediate objects cycling around a dynamic object. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, an immediate object is the object of a sign as it is understood at some given point in the semiotic process, whereas a dynamic object is the object of the sign as it stands at the end of that process. Thus, an exhaustive description of a dynamic object of an attractor would mean the complete understanding of the object and semiotic entropy at the same time. That is way the center of this graphic is black. The dynamic object might as well be called a blank space as Knut Stünkel has introduced the term.
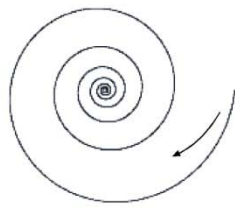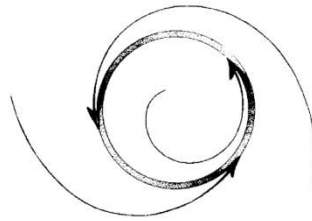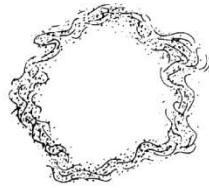
point attractor   limit cycle attractor   torus attractor

Lorenz attractor   start of diffusion   strange attractor

In chaos theory and the theory of dynamic systems different sorts of attractors and their interplay have been identified; and this might be useful to be applied to the history of religions. Geometrically, an attractor can be a point, a curve, a manifold, or even a complex set with a fractal structure known as a strange attractor.

The one-point-attractor is structured by the process of punctualisation. Theoretically, any entity such as currents, groups, organizations, individuals, places, concepts, texts, images and other cultural artefacts might become an attractor in which other entities are strongly attached to each other. However, even an entity that functions as an attractor is situated in a broader process of attraction. This broader process might be described as a limit cycle where two or more points construct a cycle. If the directed circulation of a cycle attractor is slightly influenced by other forces, we might speak of a torus attractor in which the trajectories constitute a torus. If two limit cycle or torus attractors get in contact, we get the constellation of a so called Lorenz attractor. This constellation may lead to diffusion and then to a so called strange attractor – or to a torus respective a limit cycle or even a one-point-attractor again. The direction depends on the proportion between different forces.
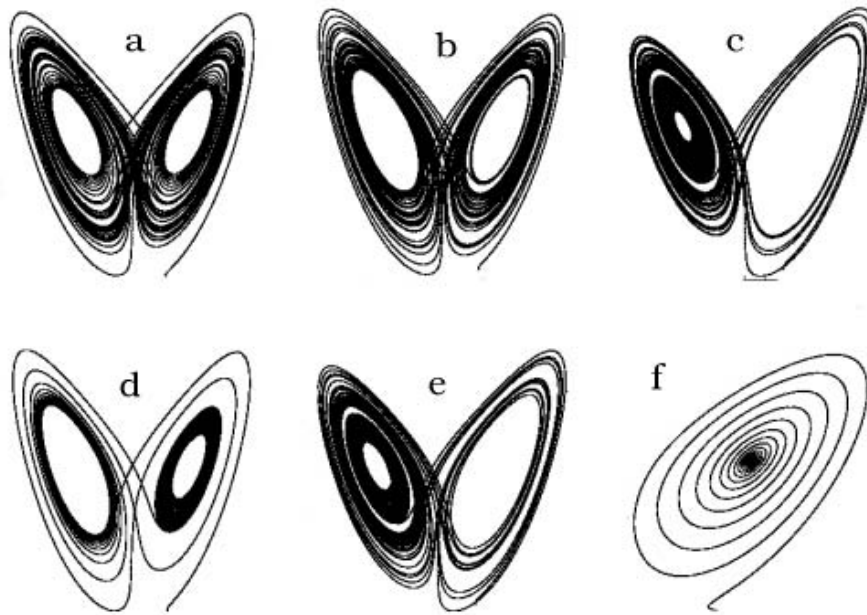
This graphic shows different phases of a Lorenz attractor. Both of the differently directed forces can be in balance like it is the case in figure a, or in different constellations of an imbalance like in figures c, d, and e, that might lead to a one-point-attractor.

The Lorenz attractor is of special interest, because it consists of two entagled attractors. Applied to the history of religions, a Lorenz attractor may consist of
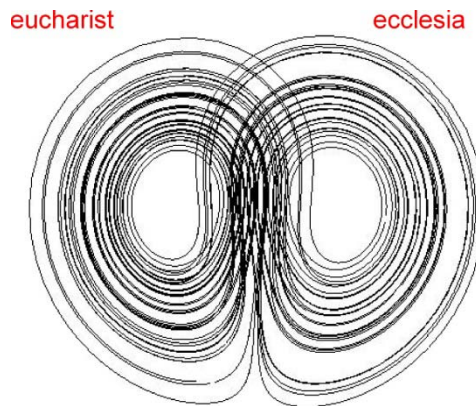
- two religions like, for instance, Buddhism and Jainism during the process of formation,
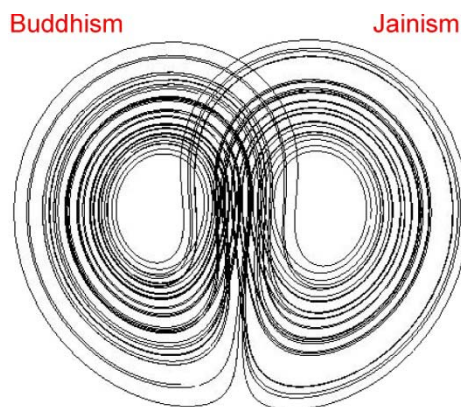
- or of two religious traditions of one religion such as Latin and Orthodox Christianity,
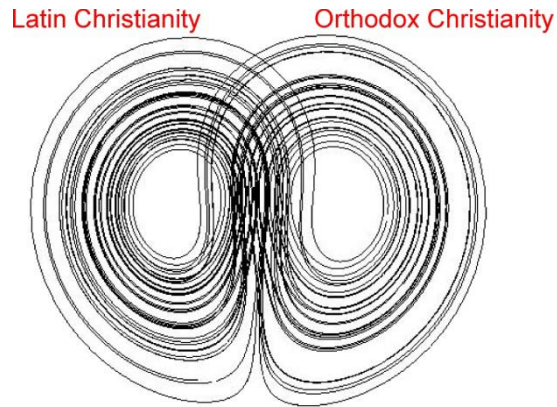
- of two conecpts in one religious tradition like, e.g., eucharist and ecclesia in Roman Catholicism,


- or of two elements in one concept such as the two motives of the dance around the golden calf and Moses receiving the Ten Commandments in the Jewish concept of exodus,
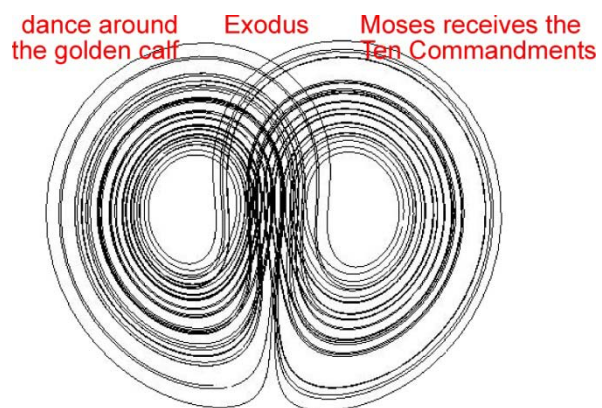
- and last, but not least between a densified religious tradition and another societal field such as politics.
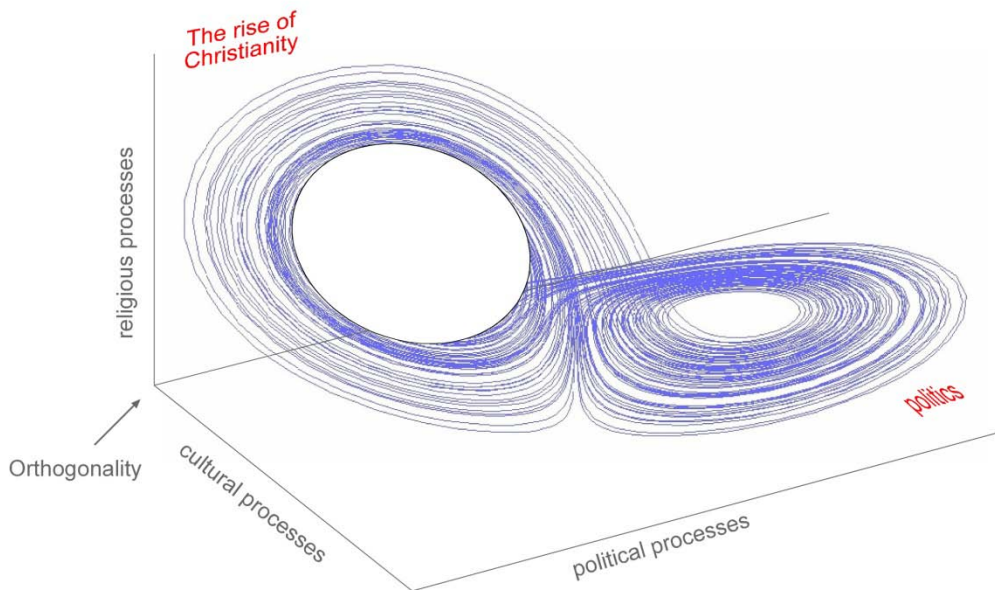
As an example, I would like to go into detail concerning the rise of early Christianity with regard to the connection with politics.
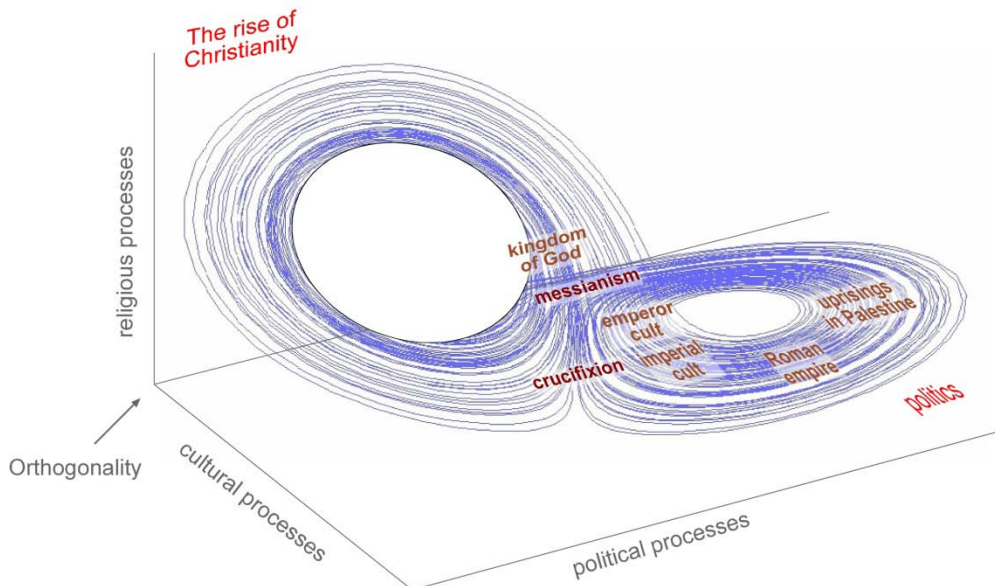

I would like to mention the Roman Empire, uprisings in Palestine, imperial cult, empire cult and the practice of crucifixion as elements of politics. The latter three entities enter the other circle of influence called early Christianity and are transformed to religious

entities. The kingdom of God is understood as distinguished from politics, and crucifixion becomes a religious sign of salvation. But how did this happen? The process can only be understood if we consider the attachment of the mentioned entities to other entities which at the same time consitute the attractor called early Christianity.

E.g., common meal communities turn via mystery cults into the Christian concept of eucharist which is attached to the concept of crucifixion.
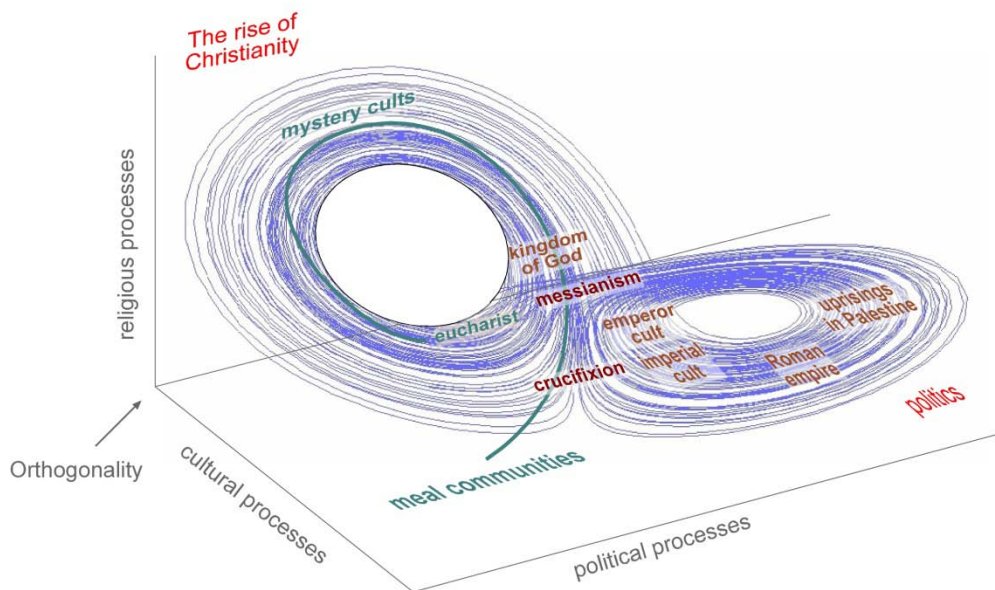
And this process is again accompanied by a transformation of other actants, for instance, from the philosophical concept of logos, via the motive of the theos aner and concepts such as monotheism, resurrection and messianism to christological concepts.
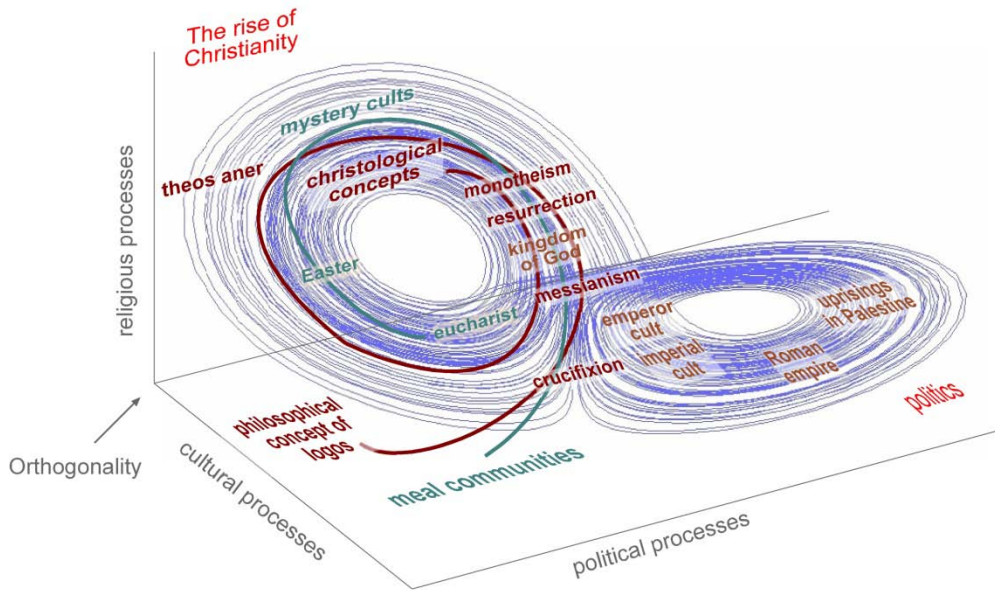
In addition, we have to consider the formation of early Judaism when describing the rise of early Christianity. Judaism also consists of a major attractor with several entities such as melchat as the Jewish version of the kingdom of God, Pessach, the concepts of exodus and covenant, the Torah, and so on.
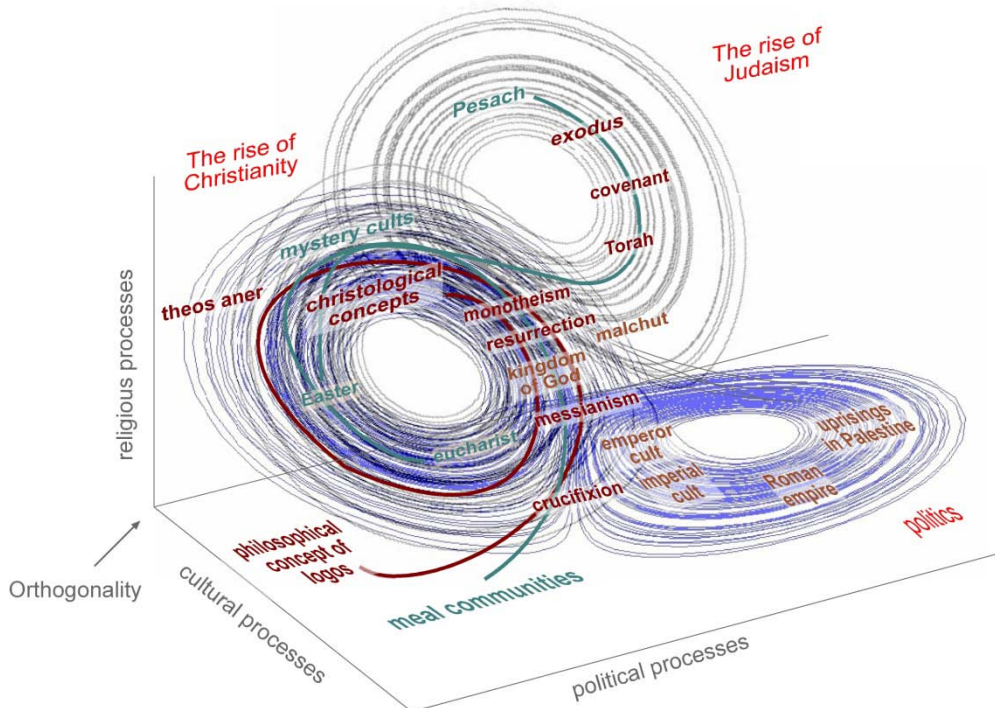
This is example does not claim empirical evidence, since I am a layman in the history of early Christianity and ancient Mediterranean religious history, and – apart from that – the example is much too rough. It should only demonstrate the heuristic potential of the attractor model for empirical work. Christianity certainly cannot be described as a whole attractor that easily. The actants mentioned consist of many other entities and might proceed as an attractor by themselves. Thus, the terms I mentioned should be analysed as punctualisations, hubs and nodes. E.g., there is no Christian meaning of the cross and crucifixion as such, but only semiotic chains and cycles of it – texts, concepts, images, other artefacts and actions that create, reproduce and transform the object of the cross as a sign.

The cross and the action of crucifixion have been and still are an attractor.

The direction leads from the practice of crucifixion in the Roman Empire where it was used for slaves, pirates, and enemies of the state and was considered a most shameful and disgraceful way to die,

> Then Jesus …said unto him:
> … come, take up the cross, and follow me. (Mark 10,21)
>
> And it was the third hour, and they crucified him. (Mark 15,25)
>
> Paul: "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks [stigmata] of the Lord Jesus." (Galatians 6,17)

to the New Testament, where, for instance, in Mark, chapter 10, it is written: "Then Jesus …said unto him: … come, take up the cross, and follow me." In Mark, chapter 15, we read: "It was the third hour, and they crucified him." And Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks [stigmata] of the Lord Jesus."

The circulation of the cross and crucifixion as a sign continues through the history of Christianity up to present days.

Religion - Politics

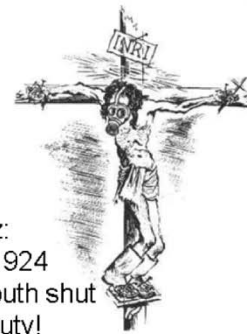Philippines Flagellations on Good Friday 2010

Pope Benedict XVI holding a cross, Vatican, 2007

Friedrich I. Barbarossa as a crusader, 1188

St. Francis of Assisi receives the stigmata, 13th cent.

George Grosz: Ecce Homo, 1924 Keep your mouth shut and do your duty!

The examples in the circulation of entities around the cross as an attractor that are shown demonstrate the oscillation between a religious and a political interpretation cycling around the Christian religion as an attractor and politics as another attractor: The image of the 13th century showing St. Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata and Philippines Flagellations on Good Friday in 2010 on the one hand, an image dating from 1188 showing Friedrich I. Barbarossa as a crusader and the painting from George Grosz: "Ecce Homo" from 1924, showing Jesus at the cross with a gas mask, on the other hand.

The cross is a densified sign and comprises all those and many more entities that are attached with each other. It is continuously being unfolded in the ongoing semiotic process of circulating signs.
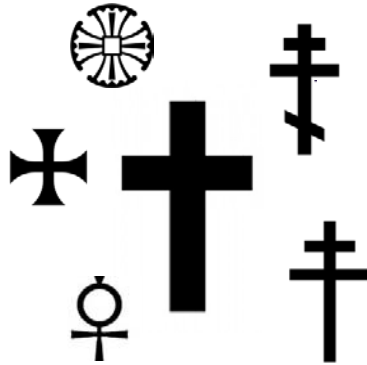
Well, I have to correct myself: Due to the internal differentiation of Christianity, the cross is only a *relatively* densified sign.

***

Finally, I would like to give a short explanation of the topics "knowledge" and "action" that are part of our conference, while the first conference on attraction that took place last year dealt with "experience" and "materiality".

4 Dimensions of psychic & social processes
(analytically distinguished)
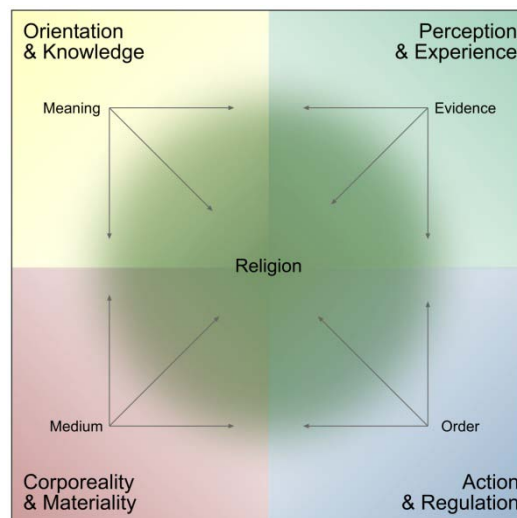
In order to structure the complex matter, we analytically distinguish between four dimensions for the interpretation of psychic and social processes, namely

- Orientation and knowledge that provide reality with *meaning*.
- Perception and experience which provide knowledge and action with *evidence* in the sense of connecting outer visibility and inner certainty.
- Action and regulation that create *order* for social processes.

- And corporeality and materiality which are relevant for knowledge, experience and action in the form of *media* (in the broadest sense of the term). Archival and communication media provide the material relationship to knowledge, and embodiment creates the link to corporeality for knowledge, experience, and action. The dimension of materiality considers the "agency of objects" claimed by Bruno Latour in sociology and by David Morgan and others in Religious Studies.

In empiricism all four dimensions are inter-related; e.g., actions can only take place on the basis of an existing pool of knowledge, and experiences depends on corporeality, etc. Yet, analytically it makes sense to examine the relationship of individual circumstances and entities to each of these dimensions in order to better grasp developments in each dimension and thus also in their relational interagency.

The organizing team of the conference has decided to focus on the two dimensions of "materiality" and "experience" in the first conference that took place last year. The other two dimensions of "knowledge" and "action" are subjects of this conference.
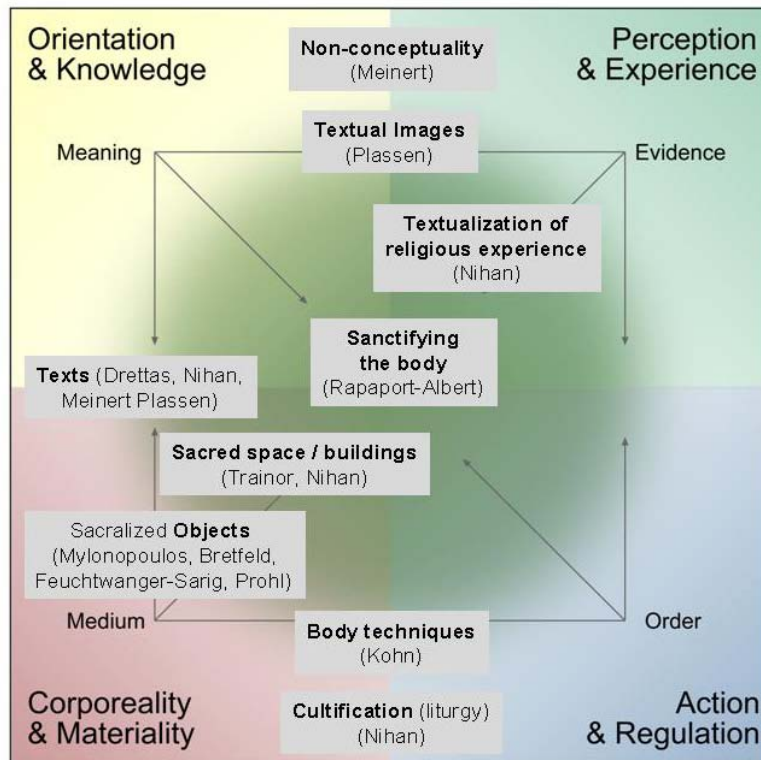
On this diagram you see topics that have been dealt with as part of an attraction process or as an attractor itself in the last year's conference.
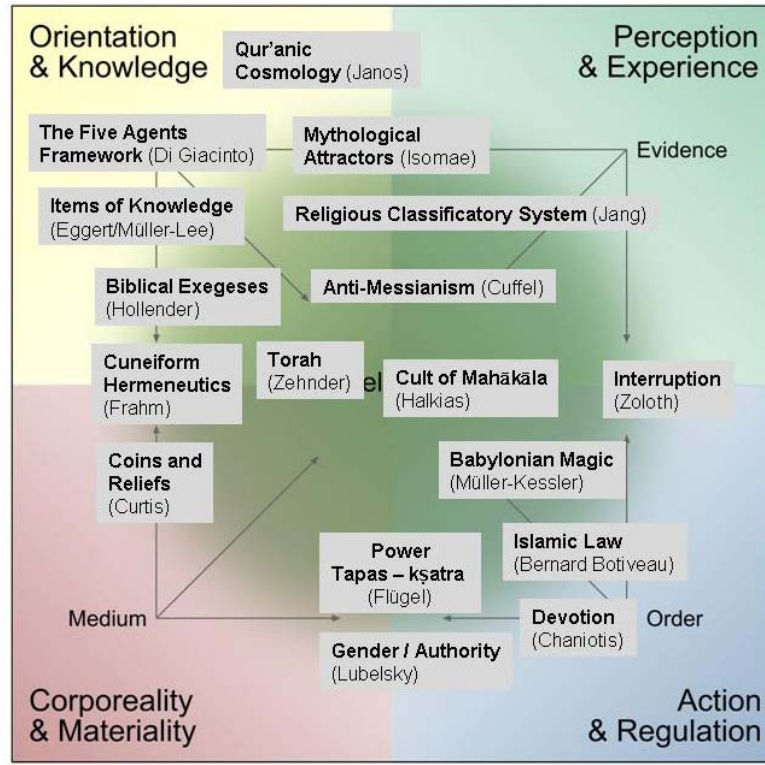
On the last diagram I have placed the topics that have been dealt with as part of an attraction process or as an attractor itself in the this year's conference on "Modes and Models of Religious Attraction. Part II: Knowledge and Action".