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Comparative Religion – Past and Present

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The study of religion is comprised of diverse research traditions and has been subject to widely different regional, political, and cultural influences. Department titles, which reflect this multiplicity, range from "science of religion," "religious studies," and "academic study of religion(s)" to "history of religion(s)" and "comparative religion."[1] The field is currently striving for a recognizable identity, and debates in the context of regional and world conferences have advanced this goal.[2]

Comparison has not been an important topic in these debates, which have been dominated by the question of whether cognitive approaches might raise the subject to the level of the hard sciences rather than remaining in the soft and interpretive discourses of empirical social sciences and historical humanities. Cognitive and evolutionary approaches sometimes do exploit comparative data, such as historical data from hundreds of societies.[3] Often, however, the degree of interpretation reflected in the classification of this data is not adequately accounted for.[4] In contrast to historical and anthropological research, much of that type of empirical research draws the bulk of its data from the (mostly white) middle classes, and, for reasons of funding and time constraints,

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1 Melvaer and Stausberg 2013; Sharpe 1986.

2 Bochinger and Rüpke 2015, 2016.

3 E.g., Swanson 1964. This is the case of the international research consortium Vancouver/Aarhus. Important contributions like Boyer 1994 are based on wide-ranging historical and cross-cultural material.

4 See the critique by Rüpke 2014a on Norenzayan 2013.

students. Social scientists, again by contrast, do not long for comparison, as they presume that their primary object is modernity, which is considered in any case at a total remove from the past.[5] The latter view holds contemporary differences to be the result of certain developmental lags that need not be explained in theoretical terms. Historians, to address another major strand among the disciplines doing research on religion, are challenged by the growing complexity of their methodological toolkits and the broadening contexts of the phenomena under study. Thus, comparison is above all a further burden and a risky one at that. Hence, in many instances the work of comparison is done by the tenured and those who do not aspire to further professional advancement.

This present reality does not reflect the history of the discipline of the History of Religion. Among its many substrata – hardly reconstructed better by anyone than Guy Stroumsa[6]– Max Müller's comparative mythology and comparative religion take pride of place. Taking a vision of religion that brought together Central and South Asian developments, on the one hand, and West Asian and Mediterranean developments, on the other, the nascent discipline aimed at formulating laws about religion, which enabled us to better understand the growing sample of marginal or non-European religions.[7] The enterprise of Comparative Religion was compelling enough to be established in universities throughout the Netherlands, the German-speaking countries, and Scandinavia, and left its imprint on anthropological approaches in Anglo-Saxon departments of the same name, and on French or Italian chairs denominated as *storia delle religioni*.[8]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the field of Comparative Religion was both attractive and threatening, as seen from contemporary theological discourse. In view of the strong historical claims of the biblical tradition as interpreted by European Jews and, above all, by European Christians, comparative research offered the promise of confirming or shattering theories about the recent origins of religion, making room for historicized versions of *Urmonotheismus* or alternative *Uroffenbarung* ("original monotheism" or "original revelation"), as well as for the naturalization of contingent historical but normative characteristics of Christianity. Missionaries and colonial administrators, who were

5 Kippenberg 2000.
6 Stroumsa 2010.
7 See Gladigow 1996; Kippenberg 1997.
8 See Sharpe 1986 and Krech 2002. See also Rüpke 2002.

interested in the religious practices of their subjects for rather different reasons, often served as data collectors.

In brief, it was the notion of "world religions" that balanced the conflicting interests and approaches. It permitted the "discovery" of cultural systems which, on the one hand, were embedded in the functioning of their so-called host societies (akin to "civic religion" or those often monopolistic Christian churches that formed alliances of "throne and altar"), and, on the other hand, contained elements of natural religion, rendering them potentially appealing equivalents of Judaism, Christianity or Islam.[9] "World religions," even they began as a construction made by external observers, soon also proved to be an internally attractive concept, as has been shown for Hinduism, which was turned from an ethnographic construct formed by the British into a national ideology.[10] The supposedly stabilized religious entities referred to as "religions" were considered at length in works of encyclopedic scope, including *Hasting's Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, now translated and updated as *Religion in Past and Present*, the Italian *Enciclopedia delle religioni*, Mircea Eliade's *Encylopedia of Religion*, and the series *Religionen der Menschheit*, whose first article was Friedrich Heiler's phenomenology of religion. I must admit that I myself did not withstand the temptation to collaborate in such literary efforts.

Abandoning "Religion"?

The second half of the twentieth century saw a major reappraisal of such research. Ethnographers, it was claimed, were supplied by docile natives with precisely what they sought. Postcolonial insights paved the way for a more fundamental critique that did not stop at criticizing isolated concepts, such as "god," "sacrifice," or "the holy." The whole concept of religion was taken to task for its implicit Western bias, its tacit adoption of Christian terms and phenomena, its unrestrained extension to non-Western cultures, and its generalization in the form of "world religions."[11] In such a context, exercising comparison smacked

9 See Stroumsa 2010:21–26 for the beginnings of the process.

10 Lipner 2001; Rubiés 2001; Jaffrelot 2007; Subrahmanyam 2014.

11 Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 1997; McCutcheon 1997; Masuzawa 2000, 2005; continued by Abeysekara 2011; cf. Isomae 2012; for counter-criticism, see e.g., Pye 2003; Orsi 2008; Schilbrack 2010; Engler 2011.

of colonial domination. That our categories, as well as our objects, have been mutually transformed (although to varying degrees) and call for an analytical perspective of entanglement rather than comparison is somewhat irrelevant. The program of *histoire croisée*, originally formulated without reference to religion, could certainly be furthered by adopting reflections on object-observer relations, notions of scale, and relationalities. At the heart of the debate, however, is whether any superordinate notion of what used to be called "religion" is possible at all.

By and large, this critique is related to specific characteristics of the current concepts of religion, and I shall propose an alternative that invites comparison. My suggestion is certainly not a *passe-partout*, but it has proved useful for my own study of ancient religions[12] and might prove fruitful beyond. In opting for a concept of religion that could serve to instruct comparative approaches, I leave aside the fact that the term "religious" is a highly contested one. The classification of something as religious opens up resources. For some, this stance confers scientific authority; for others, tax deductions. No wonder, then, that such claims compete and even clash. The following proposal, however, is not contingent upon the existence of a specific form of a concept of religion in the societies under scrutiny. Research in religion is possible even "before religion," to borrow a notion from Brent Nongbri.[13] Yet in the end, Nongbri and I diverge. Doing historical and comparative research on religion "before religion," that is, prior to the formation of the practices, beliefs, and organizations that typify contemporary religion, is both possible and useful. Defining an interest and a point of departure for research is always an arbitrary act – but in academia such actions are always taken in a situation of open competition, judged by others and superseded by their accounts. Thus, I will try to make that definition as adequate as possible and to capture phenomena that seem to be relevant for the interest of the inquiry. The next account is sure to be as arbitrary as mine, but perhaps also just a bit better than mine.[14]

Current academic discourse conceptualizes religion as a collective enterprise. Religions in the plural, then, are enterprises of different collectives. For the discourses of the twentieth century, Émile Durkheim's

12 See Rüpke 2015, to which the following is indebted.

13 Nongbri 2013.

14 I follow here the arguments of Ankersmit 2002 and 2005 on the "truth" of historiography.

concept of religion was foundational.[15] By sacralizing the normative core of a society, its members monitor the contingent character of their collective orientation and obligations and create a system of orienting symbols. This emergent system is reproduced and invigorated through rituals; it is given explanatory value in narratives or systematized teachings and is made broadly relevant through ethical imperatives. In its advanced form, an organization that is able to sanction deviant behavior (with or without assistance by the apparatus called "state") might support the functioning of religion.

Such a model has its limits if asked to account for religious pluralism or the vast array of individual appropriations of religion, particularly in the urban contexts that more and more characterize the present world.[16] These constraints, however, do not warrant a wholesale dismissal of the concept of "religion." Instead, I propose to introduce an analytical model of religion that enables us to describe changes in the social locus and individual importance of religion, as well as to delineate the formation of institutions which are established and modified in perpetual and habitual transactions. To elaborate such a model presupposes the conceptualization of religion from the methodological perspective of the intersubjective and communicative constitution of the individual, that is, from the perspective of its individuation in relation to and interaction with the social and material context. While my main interest is not in the details of this model, I shall offer some nonetheless. My claim is that by rendering descriptive and explanatory models explicit, perspectives of comparison are generated that allow for a non-arbitrary but theoretically driven contextualization of the very comparison. Ultimately, this contextualization is to be complemented by taking into account differences in historical development and the entanglement between phenomena and observers of phenomena.

Defining Religion

I shall begin with a definition. Religion is the temporary and situational enlargement of the environment – judged as relevant by one or more of the actors – beyond the unquestionably plausible social environment inhabited by co-existing humans who are in communication (and hence observable). What qualifies as "not unquestionably or immediately

15 Durkheim 1947; cf. Rosati 2009; Seiwert 2009; King 2013.
16 See, e.g., Wilcox 2013.

plausible" differs from one cultural context to another and even from situation to situation. The plausible social environment might include animals and, in my opinion, even inanimate objects. Plausibility, the possibility of gaining the assent of others, is both relative and in itself a communicative, or more specifically, a rhetorical concept. Dead significant others, divine beings conceptualized as persons, or places that cannot be defined topographically might fall into the area postulated as religious here – that is, beings or phenomena to whom a "special"[17] significance or "agency" is accorded. Identifying what is individually or even culturally contested is, of course, a matter of interpretation for which the observer, the scholar of religion, is partially but not solely, responsible. "Implausibility" here refers to the risk, real or imagined, to actors that their communicative ascriptions of agency do not meet universal approval in the immediate situation or thereafter.

If religion is defined as the attribution of *agency* to something beyond the unquestionably plausible, then, in order to capture what I would like to probe as the particularities of religion, this could also serve as a starting point for the development of an analytically useful tool. In the context of a comparative study of religion, to conceptualize *religion as communication* (as we have done so far) requires the identification and analyses of human religious agents, whose collective *religious identity* is of varying importance for the constitution of itself. I suggest looking into these three areas in order to compare what I take to be the results of the lessons learned by the criticism of the phenomenology of religion; that is, I suggest comparing constellations and processes – observing and comparing "religion-in-the-making" as against "ready-made religion."[18]

Religious Agency

Interpretive sociology and cultural studies have characterized human agency as meaningful agency, to be understood against the background of socially created meaning.[19] Pragmatism has refined such analyses: above all, agency is held to be problem-solving in nature. The individual is continually confronted by novel situations, which he or she deals with in accordance with dynamically constructed meaning. Goals and

17 I borrow the concept from Taves 2009 and 2010.
18 See Daniels 1995; Katz 2008; Knott 2010.
19 See Weber 1985 and Schütz 1981, or more recently Geertz 1987.

a meaning for the agency are developed, or at least further developed, as the agent is always bound up in social contexts and exists within traditions, in the very process of exercising agency. Within this concrete yet fluid space of possibilities, the agent can thus also become creative.[20] Competence and scope of agency are developed in the course of exercising agency.[21] In this sense agency is:

> ... the temporarily constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments ... which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.[22]

It is the endlessly renewed and also repeated interaction between people that creates the structures and traditions that delimit the subsequent exercise of agency, which in turn alters or even challenges those same structures and traditions.[23]

The enlargement of the field of agency by the involvement of divine actors or authorities offers extended possibilities for imagination and intervention. In this way, religious agency, the attribution of agency to divine actors (or the like), permits the human agent fantasies that transcend the situation in question, and creative strategies, whether as the leader in implementation of a ritual, or as a person possessed. The converse is also possible. The same mechanism can trigger an abjuration of personal agency, resulting in impotence and passivity, with agency being reserved for the quite "special" actors. The potential for the exercise of agency is thus defined and enhanced in a temporal perspective, so that ever more successful and sophisticated "schematizations" are undertaken with reference to past exercises of agency and the formation of routines, ever more sweeping projections into the future are facilitated with reference to the consequences of agency in the context of hypothesis-framing, and ever more apt "contextualizations" are employed with reference to practice-orientated assessment of the present state of

20 See Joas 1996.
21 Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, also on what follows.
22 *Ibid.*:970.
23 Emirbayer and Mische 1998; taken up by Hitlin and Elder 2007; Dépelteau 2008; Campbell 2009; Noland 2009; Small 2011; Silver 2011.

the facts on the basis of social experience.[24] An individual does not "have" agency. Rather, in concrete negotiation with his or her structural environment, the individual acts with the force of agency. Structures and the individual as actor reciprocally configure one another.[25] This holds true for any approach to religiosity, spirituality, or mysticism, and to religious specialists and other types of religious actors.

Religious Identity

The individual seldom acts alone. He or she acts, rather, with the notion of being a member of a particular group, family, village, or even "people" or "nation." These notions are strongly situation-dependent, emphasizing now the one, now the other identity, as mother, worshipper of Bona Dea, adept of the Bible or of the Stoic philosophy.[26] Such notions, even when vaguely formed, can influence our behavior.[27] These are first and foremost *notions* of belonging, independent of whether the group in question exists in the minds of others, or whether others reckon this person as belonging to the group. It is thus a question of self-classification, of the individual's assessment of his membership and the significance he assigns it, in common with others insofar as the membership is discernible by them. It is a question of felt emotional connection and dependence (to the extent of a considerable overlapping of the personal and this collective identity), and of the degree to which membership is embedded in everyday practice and characterizes personal behavior. Finally, it is a question of the narratives associated with such notions and knowledge of the values, defining characteristics, and history of the group.[28] In view especially of the gradual development of religions in Mediterranean Antiquity and East Asia, it must be stressed that the term "group" does not imply an established association. A situation-dependent grouping of (not only human!) actors, of whom the individual in question does or does not count himself a member, suffices. The many ancient inscriptions showing family relationships, citizenship, or place

24 Emirbayer and Mische 1998:975, 983, 993.
25 *Ibid.*:1004.
26 Rebillard 2012:2–5 on "salient identity."
27 The work of Tajfel and Turner was ground-breaking for "social identity theory"; see Tajfel 1974:69 on the definition of the group; Turner 1975. Summarized in Ellemers et al. 1999.
28 Ashmore et al. 2004:83, with an illustrative chart.

of origin can also be read as declarations of membership.[29] For many, of course, this could lead to highly complex collective identities, involving various memberships (and also dissociations).[30] It is not handbook accounts of "religions," then, that ought to be compared, but strategies of ascription or rejection, inclusion or exclusion, of inculcating or generalizing identities, and the role such processes play in shaping religious actions and beliefs.

Religious Communication[31]

Competency in communication is my third perspective on the individual who brings religion into play in his communication with other people. At the same time, the fact that communication is a way of understanding religion in general allows us to associate enhanced possibilities of communication with the formal variety of religious practice.

We do not know how (and how often) the inhabitants of the Roman Empire – to return to my special field of competence – spoke with their gods or their God, or what they spoke about. But we have a considerable number of texts that describe such communication and hundreds of thousands of direct witnesses to it, in the form of the remains of gifts, as well as visible documentation, intended to be permanent. In the Mediterranean basin of the Greco-Roman period, this often took the form of votive inscriptions and dedications that were at least temporarily on display, in a clear departure from practices more prominent in other regions (but not absent from the said area) of drowning, burying, or offering perishable goods. This points to the dual character of much, although not necessarily all, communication with the divine: the religious act is also a message to the actor's fellow humans, to witnesses by eye and ear, an audience or a readership.

The extension of participants' communication to the divine while performing an action arouses attention and creates relevance. Moreover, the key to understanding communication lies in this latter term. Successful communication requires that attention be garnered by the promise of relevant information. This must be credibly and audibly provided by the speaker, and the audience must indicate to him or her that they apprehend and believe the promise. Only afterwards can communication

29 Beard 1991; cf. Woolf 2012.
30 See Ashmore et al. 2004:84.
31 The following draws on Rüpke 2014b.

proceed. In the rush and tumble of everyday affairs, only the promise of relevance (in whatever form that takes) can attract attention to a communication that then changes those addressed (in ways that are never predictable!). In this sense, the communication meets with success.[32] It is not surprising that people extend these ground rules of communicative success to their communications with non-humans. Many of the distinctive medial and material traces of religion figuring prominently in comparison are a consequence of that extension.

To reach the gods, it is first necessary to arouse their attention. How is that to be accomplished? Success does not lie in selection from a catalogue of prayers, vows, offerings, ascetic practices, animal sacrifices, processions, or (to return to the Roman Empire) circus games (all according to the size of one's purse), but in an attention-arousing combination of such communicative techniques. In this regard, the classic manuals of religious history give a quite false impression. Rarely did addressing a deity involve prayer or sacrifice alone; religion is always a communicative strategy, appropriating, modifying, and replacing previous institutions. Religion, we might say, is religions in the making.

Place is foremost in the hierarchy of considerations. Here, comparative work could build on a substantial base of existing research.[33] An established sanctuary indicates others' communicative success. It suggests the proximity of a deity, who lives in this place or at least visits it with some frequency. Naive confidence in the presence might be replaced by philosophical reflection on the conditions underlying the possibility of the presence of an omnipotent deity in the next moment. Such changes in the registers of religious communication need to be taken into account in any comparative enterprise. That people in antiquity as well as in present-day Europe, Mexico, or India are reported to claim to have seen statues of deities nodding to a supplicant does not mean that deity and statue were equated in conversation outside the temple. Likewise, it seems to be common for a deity to be invoked in another deity's sanctuary, and it not considered unthinkable that successful communication then be documented by, say, an image of the foreign god in that same place. In contrast to the significance granted to place, choice of an established time seems to vary: it may be of little importance in some

32 Sperber and Wilson 1987; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2012.

33 See, e.g., the classic studies of Appadurai and Appadurai Breckenridge 1976; for India, Fuller 1984; and for the Roman West, Stambaugh 1978; Attema et al. 1998; Revell 2013.

areas, but paramount in others that witness huge crowds of pilgrims at particular times.

Yet choice of location is preceded by the question of how the divine is to be brought into the space. In everyday reality, recourse is made to a manageable number of popular configurations of the divine, present in the form of names, images, or cult sites. The address to the god or goddess is not one of several elements, "prayer," but the fundamental communicative process. This process requires intensification and can be expanded to arouse attention and to charge with further relevance the act of communication.[34] Foremost among the methods used is acoustic emphasis: the invocation is isolated from the bustle of the everyday by stillness. The address is not made in everyday language: formal speech helps to ritualize the act of communication and raise it above the ordinary. The effect is enhanced by singing and instrumental music, by noise countering the stillness invoked above.

Choice of vestment has always been crucial to acts of communication that involve a high degree of public visibility. Additionally, the attention of both the deity and any passers-by could be awakened by coordinated movement. Processions, that is, walking in company, are a key element; in the larger cities of the Mediterranean and West Asian world there was scarcely any alternative means to gather a reasonably large company, both active (marchers) and passive (spectators). Wide scope for communication is provided by the custom, also taken from the interpersonal realm, of bestowing gifts; their materiality heightened the relevance of the spoken message and had the capacity to secure that message in lasting form. Both aesthetics and material worth could play a part, and mass-produced miniatures have long been a popular way of securing divine regard.

Again, historical paths and particular contexts can account for specific outcomes. As ancient religions increasingly came to comprise visible public acts, the process of individual communication acquired a public. This public might be present or absent; in the latter case it was reached by meta-communicative means, through discourse about the proceedings or via secondary media, such as inscriptions or books. The animal sacrifice required a committee, vows were spoken aloud, and many forms of divination took place in public. As such, the communication addressed to a deity was received by a wider audience. The vow spoken aloud by the army commander not only reached the deity but

34 Patzelt 2018.

also demonstrated his religious competence to his soldiers, who were no less his intended audience.

The public character of religious communication certainly had the effect of amplifying the meaning of communication between humans and gods. It also had a witnessing function, ensuring the success of a communication that was so asymmetric and so fraught with the threat of failure, or at least subjecting it to the socially tested rules of obligation, reciprocity, and deference. Where this public element was absent, written forms served as a bridge, as is attested by curse tablets and inscribed votive texts in the Greco-Roman world.

Religion as a Strategy at the Level of the Individual

I have defined religion as the extension of particular environments beyond the immediately plausible social milieu of living people in specific forms of agency, identity formulation, and communication. As noted above, what is "immediately plausible" in a given milieu may vary in ways that are entirely culture-dependent. Plausibility, literally "worthy of applause," is itself a communicative, rhetorical category. The communication to the "not unquestionably plausible" might be directed to the dead, or gods conceived of in human form, or even places that are not definable in terms of mere topography, such as heaven. The identification and interpretation of what is contested in cultural contexts has much to do with the boundaries drawn by the observer. We see this in the recurrence of the word "gods" in the examples I offered, but it can also be detected in the matter of demarcation, instanced here by my radical rejection of a boundary between religion and magic.[35]

A high level of investment in the construction of initially improbable actors as "social partners" creates an "excess" of personal consolidation, power, or problem-solving capacity in the person making that investment. This outcome becomes precarious on account of the disadvantage caused to others, who may seek to defend themselves against it. Sacralization, that is, attributing a "special" or "more special" quality to objects or processes in the visible environment, is an element of such an investment strategy.[36] The investment metaphor can be applied to the

35 See Otto 2011.

36 On this dynamic concept of sacralization, and for a critique of the academic use of the concept of the sacral, see Rüpke 2013b. On definitions of religion that depend on the "holy," see Dobbelaere 2011; Taves 2009 replaces it with the "special."

enormous scale on which religions have recourse to media, cult images, and sanctuaries, as well as to complex rituals and strategies concerning texts and communication. We might be curious, too, about any inferior status reinforced by religion; some choose to counter this situation with strategies of social change in a religious context, while others turn their backs on religion to pursue social mobility on their own account (when they do not turn to quietism).[37]

Back to Comparison

I have signaled some questions still to be posed, some observations still to be wrung from source material that is often dry enough in the fields tackled by historians of chronologically distant periods. I have also hinted at interdependencies and mechanisms of reinforcement in the field of religious development. The acquisition of competencies both strengthens communication and lowers the thresholds confronting it,[38] and a denser communication network intensifies the need on the part of the individual actor to develop more complex collective identities.[39]

The proposed model does not describe, however, a stable pathway, an evolutionary trend, or some sort of equilibrium. Quite the opposite: multiple aporias remain to be unpacked over the long term. The mega-processes we are concerned with here are individualization, mediatization, and institutionalization, all commonly understood to be indicators of modernization rather than facets of the religious history of premodern periods or non-Western societies.[40] By means of these processes, however, the concept of religion suggested here in fact delivers what it sets out to deliver. The highly unstable object it permits us to observe is religion in a comparative perspective.

The historiography fit for such a task is still in the making. Recent historical research has amassed a large bundle of perspectives, ranging from social history, history of mentalities, and *longue durée* to feminism and media history. Large-scale histories of religion, however, are rare, and tend to reproduce traditional patterns and boundaries, setting a basis for comparisons that rightly nobody is willing to undertake any longer. But what are the alternatives to such "confessional"

37 Cf. Cameron 2004:257 (without reference to religion).
38 Punyanunt-Carter et al. 2008.
39 See Onorato and Turner 2004; Verkuyten and Martinovic 2012.
40 Rüpke 2013a; Fuchs and Rüpke 2015; Rüpke 2016.

historiography? New models strong enough to overcome the constructed limits of religions, or to come to grips with the diversity which exists within constructed religious identities, are so far lacking. Comparison, although occasionally given its due in the history of religion and recently advocated by scholars as diverse in approach as Claude Calame, Marcel Detienne, Philippe Borgeaud, and Steven Engler,[41] has typically been small in scale and harnessed to explain only a handful of phenomena. In transcending the boundaries of self-stabilizing traditions, history of religion has much to offer on a grand scale, too. Familiar with de-essentializing its object, "religion," and paying close heed to diffusion, it is amply capable of advancing the concept of transfer as well as those of entangled and comparative history.[42] With respect to comparison, the history of religion can contribute substantially from its own evolution.

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41 Borgeaud 2002; Detienne 2002; Spineto 2009; Holdrege 2011; Calame and Lincoln 2012; Engler and Gardiner 2013.

42 Cf. Lorenz 1999; Werner and Zimmermann 2004; Rüpke 2018.

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