

History of Ideas Research Centre

The new History of Ideas Research Centre was founded upon the conviction that the history of ideas is of great importance not only for all academic fields as well as for culture, but first and foremost for society. The history of ideas enables a better understanding of our times: of the culture and manners of thinking characteristic for particular traditions that cannot be understood without such a perspective. We are not Europeans because of the territory we inhabit or the new European treaties being concluded, but because European culture has been shaped by particular basic ideas and attitudes. They can only be clearly comprehended and commented on via an examination of their history. The history of ideas explains our mental and cultural presuppositions and thereby may lead to justified affirmation and critique – not only a critique of traditional ideas, but also a critique of today's situation that often reveals some deficiencies in the context of prior convictions and keynotes. As historical studies become more specialized, investigations will be necessary which will underline common presuppositions and thoughts, and in such a way promote interdisciplinary work. This is permitted precisely by the studies of the history of ideas, where many academic fields overlap. Because of such fruitfulness of the history of ideas' studies, the research centre decided to launch the online journal *Orbis Idearum: European Journal of the History of Ideas* and the book series *Vestigia Idearum Historica: Beiträge zur Ideengeschichte Europas* by mentis Verlag in Münster.

The concept of the history of ideas has admittedly lost its semantic outlines. In accordance with Lovejoy's research program, based on the supposition of constant unit-ideas that through historical research have been rejected rather than having been proved as useful, the concept of the history of ideas may refer to any inquiry in the field of the *Geistesgeschichte*. By contrast, the new research centre attempts to once more give the history of ideas a more distinct profile. For the centre, ideas are thoughts, representations and fantasy images that may be expressed in various forms. Ideas manifest themselves first and foremost in language, but also in nonlinguistic media, activities, rites and practices. With regard to the latter, they do not always manifest themselves directly, but are sometimes based on certain cultural phenomena to attain their linguistic signification. In this way the history of ideas neither coincides with the

history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) nor with the intellectual history (*allgemeine Geistesgeschichte*). Because the first of them is oriented towards thoughts expressed linguistically, and in this manner, elaborates only the part of the history of ideas. The second of them is devoted to the whole mental life of humankind, and at the same time may involve religious systems and fundamental convictions of the whole epoch. By contrast, the history of ideas envisages particular respective elements that are certifiable in thought or in culture, and which can be explored in a certain time period, both in their vicissitude or constancy - that can be described, analyzed, and interpreted in their appearance, function, and effect. So taken, the history of ideas occupies an intermediate position: it has a wider field as the history of concepts that could be understood as one of its subareas and has more a specific task than the intellectual history (*allgemeine Geistesgeschichte*). One must resist more than in the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) against the temptation to put the historians' interpretations in place of historical ideas.

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