



What Religion Can Be: Mongolian Classifications, Comparative Perspectives, and a Global View

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Abstract

This article highlights some important conclusions in Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's study, "Lamas and Shamans," and offers some reflections on its relevance for the study of religion more broadly. It argues that comparing the Tibetan/Mongolian process of creating a classification system for religion(s) with the parallel and analogous process in "Western" discourses can yield important insights, especially for the endeavor of category formation, which is crucial in Religious Studies.

1. Introduction

In the decade since it was first published in German, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's "Lamas and Shamans" (2024) has lost nothing of its relevance. Rather, reading this essay afresh and realizing how many details and important insights it contains, I feel that it is more like a good wine that only got better with age. A thorough reading also reveals its intricate composition, in which arguments about specifics are carefully woven into the broader thesis and vice versa. All parts are important here, since they constitute aspects of an approach that requires both depth and breadth. In the following remarks I wish to highlight, and reflect on, some points that I find particularly noteworthy.

First, it is important to recall the essay's original context. It was published in a volume that had emerged out of a conference entitled "Is Religion a European Invention?" and organized by the Workgroup on Asian Religious History (AKAR) of the German Association for the Study of Religions. In that volume, case studies from South, Central, North, and East Asia complicate and rebut the common notion that the concept of religion as a distinct segment of culture had originated exclusively in Europe and was then imposed upon the rest of the world through colonization or general Western cultural imperialism. For most of the case studies, the starting point is the discussion of terms in premodern sources that serve as semantic or functional equivalents of the Western category "religion." They demonstrate that premodern Asian thinkers were perfectly capable of theorizing and classifying religion(s) without Western guidance. But while the respective terms' semantic ranges and (linguistic and political) functions overlap

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considerably with modern Western uses of the term “religion,” the studies also argue that they are not simply identical and that the differences can only enrich our conceptualization of religion (Schalk et al. 2013).

Viewed in the context of that volume, “Lamas and Shamans,” or especially its first part, functions as one case study among several. Pointing this out is important because it very much reflects the spirit of the essay’s thesis. Yes, it is about Tibet and Mongolia, lamas and shamans, but they primarily serve as a historical example which corroborates a much bigger argument that is consequential for religious studies more generally. For this reason, the lack of expertise or interest in Tibetan or Mongolian religions is no excuse for not reading this essay. Yet, while its general conclusions go far beyond this specific case, its grounding in historical evidence is indispensable.

2. Mongolian classifications of “religion(s)”

Let me make a few remarks about the historical study before I address its relation to the broader argument. The study discusses the rapid spread of (Tibetan) Buddhism among the Mongols from the late 16th century onwards. The multi-pronged missionizing effort included new laws issued by the Mongol rulers that favored Buddhism; the burning of shamanic ritual objects; material incentives (“bribes”) for memorizing and performing Buddhist mantras; the Buddhist rebranding and incorporation of indigenous deities, spirits, and worship practices; and more. The focus of the analysis lies on the terminology with which Buddhist lamas imagined and framed indigenous religious experts, the shamans. Since the shamans transmitted their knowledge orally, the essay explains, the only available textual sources for studying the early process are Buddhist ones, leaving us with a one-sided perspective.

While it may seem self-evident to scholars of premodern Asian cultures, it should be noted that this kind of study requires a firm command of the respective languages, here: Mongolian and Tibetan as well as Russian, since Russian scholars have done important work in this field. Even a cursory look into the essay’s footnotes reveals that most of the original sources are only available in manuscript form and have not been translated into a Western language. Nina Kollmar-Paulenz is one of very few academics with the expertise to do this painstaking work, which makes this essay all the more valuable.

The Tibetan monks who brought Buddhism to the Mongols in the 16th century quickly figured out who their Mongolian competitors were. They did not need a European Orientalist time traveler from the future to classify Buddhism and Shamanism as two “religions” for them. Nor would they have cared for a modern critic explaining to them that “religions”—and the boundaries between them—were merely Western inventions. Rather, they drew boundaries and classified “us” and “them” with categories long established in their own Tibetan Buddhist intellectual tradition. The terms *nom* (Tibetan *chos*; Sanskrit *dharma*, “[Buddhist] doctrine, truth, law”) and *šasin* (Tib. *bstan pa*; Skt. *śāsana*, “[Buddhist] teaching, tradition”) were used, first, to demarcate the religious from the secular realm. Second, they also denoted the right Buddhist view in contrast to the wrong views of others, here: the shamans. And the monks applied yet another familiar term that had

been used in internal Tibetan debates for labeling a doctrinal adversary, *buruyu üjel* (Tib. *Ita log*, “wrong/heretical view”), to juxtapose the shamanic with their own *burqan-u šasin*, “teaching of the Buddha” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 12–18).

While the Buddhist texts contain little information about what exactly the “wrong views” were, they clearly identify those who held them: the male and female shamans (*böge*). The texts discuss their practice as healers, exorcists, and spirit (*ongyod*) mediums more extensively, likely because the Buddhist monks identified them as direct competitors. Shamans fulfilled a societal function similar to theirs, tapped into the same patronage resources, and had a similar habitus. These and other parallels allowed them to be identified as a “species” of the same “genus”—a genus we may call “religious experts.” The classifications demonstrate that Buddhist monks identified a distinct *religious* segment of society—one in which both monks and shamans operated—long before European scholars would introduce the term “religion” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 18–23).

During the 17th and 18th centuries the terms *nom*, *šasin*, and *üjel* underwent gradual changes to include more aspects of religious practice. Shamanism was eventually reified as *surtayun*, “teaching,” and as *böge mörgöl*, “shamanic worship,” a term that highlights (public) ritual performances. Now the shamans (*böge*), which had formerly been embedded in individual local contexts in a variety of ways, were imagined as forming a distinct, unified community and treated as such, also by the state through legal regulations.

Gradually, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the term *šasin* lost its exclusive Buddhist connotation and fully developed into a comparative category which fulfilled a function almost analogous to that of “religion” in contemporary Western usage. Aside from the “yellow *šasin*” (i.e., the Buddhist religion, referring to the yellow hats of the dGe lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism which is dominant in Mongolia), there was a “black *šasin*” (a derogatory designation of Shamanism), a *Lalu-yin šasin* (Islam), and a *Keristos-un šasin* (Christianity). As the final step of the reification process, the shamans appropriated the originally pejorative term “black *šasin*” as a self-designation and have identified as such since (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 23–25).

This short and insufficient summary of Nina Kollmar-Paulenz’s rich historical study has left many details out, but I hope it captured the main points. The study is crucial for the essay’s broader argument; once exposed to this history, you cannot unsee it. When we ask how contemporary Mongolian scholars in the humanities and social sciences conceptualize “religion” and we encounter the term *šasin*, one can no longer claim that the latter merely translates the modern Western term *religion* into Mongolian. Rather, just like *religion* in Western intellectual history, *šasin* operated as a category long before Mongolians became aware of the 19th-century Western discourse. This ever-evolving category demarcated a religious vs. a secular realm of society; distinguished true/Buddhist from false/shaman ideas and practices; and classified systems of belief and practice more generically. An in-depth comparison of this process with the evolution of the term *religio/religion* in Europe during roughly the same centuries, including the analysis of semantic networks in which they evolved, should reveal intriguing similarities.

The point here is that these developments took place largely independently. Surely, the exchange between Western and Mongolian scholars in more recent times did have an impact, as the example of the term Shamanism illustrates: While accounts from the 19th century depicted shamans as experts for very specific ritual performances, today the Mongolian semantic of “Shamanism” (*böge mörgöl / böge-yin šasin*) has merged with a Western usage of the term to encompass all folk religious practices. Yet, it is important to note that Mongolian scholarship also expresses concepts from European religions, such as “God” in Christianity, in a terminology that is rooted in the Buddhist tradition, which causes some semantic shifts. Again, this is not unlike Western scholarship trying to capture non-Western religions with categories that were rooted in European antiquity and Christianity (such as calling the Japanese *kami* “gods”).

3. Comparison and the *Global History of Religion*

This takes us from the historical study to the essay’s broader argument. The study demonstrates that in a centuries-long process, Buddhist thinkers created a classification system for religion(s) that is parallel and analogous to the system that developed in Western discourse. This, by itself, proves that the Western idea of religion is not a unique concept foreign to other cultures. Western intellectual thought can no longer be celebrated as an extraordinary accomplishment that supersedes all other cultures. Nor did the West, with its colonial power, simply impose its categories upon “innocent” cultures who had allegedly never classified that way. While it takes only one counterexample to disprove uniqueness, Nina Kollmar-Paulenz’s argument assumes—correctly, as other chapters in the volume demonstrate—that this Mongolian case is only one of several knowledge and classification systems that developed largely independently in Asia but that seem structurally and functionally analogous to the Western discourse.

These apparent analogies call for a deeper comparison, for which Nina Kollmar-Paulenz proposes the framework of a *Global History of Religion*. As a scholarly method, comparison comprises the investigation of both similarities and differences. Once two (or more) items have been determined as potentially productive comparands, they are studied individually and juxtaposed in view of a certain common aspect (*tertium comparationis*). In this case, the comparands are discourses, namely Mongolian (and/or other) and Western discourses about religion. Discourse comparison assumes that none of the comparands has an essential core and that everything can be contested within the discourses (Freiberger 2019, esp. Ch. 5). In the present case, it also includes the analysis of diachronic developments and then, in more recent times, of mutual exchange and impact. In the Mongolian sources, we saw a rich terminology develop and change over time with *šasin* being only one among several terms in this semantic field. Western discourse too has a variety of terms aside from *religio/religion*, e.g., *spirituality, philosophy, faith, worship, cult, sect, church*, and more. The method of discourse comparison identifies topics in the discourses, analyses the arguments related to those topics, explores the intentions and motivations of the actors, assesses the impact of the arguments, and identifies structural, semantic, and functional similarities and differences.

Such a comparative analysis of intellectual discourses about religion will, as Nina Kollmar-Paulenz argues, globalize theoretical perspectives on religion. A *Global History of Religion* allows for a multi-centric view that incorporates various analytical perspectives, Western and non-Western. (I'm using the term "Western" instead of Nina Kollmar-Paulenz's "European" here, only because I feel that American scholarship should be part of the conversation, for better or worse.) With a comparative vocabulary that develops out of such comparisons, cultural accomplishments in non-Western contexts—such as sophisticated book production—can be acknowledged more appropriately, as can the creativity and achievements of individual thinkers. Perhaps most importantly, this approach reveals that non-Western discourses are no less dynamic than Western ones, that they develop over time and have a documented history. To give one other example: In her book, *The Past Before Us*, which appeared in the same year as "Lamas and Shamans," historian Romila Thapar demonstrates that already in early India the *idea* of history existed, a "concern with a historical past, even if this past is constructed in ways different from what we conventionally regard as historical" (Thapar 2013: 701). And again, the concepts of history develop over time. Already in her early Indian texts Thapar identifies three phases which she calls historical consciousness, historical traditions, and historical writing (Thapar 2013: 684–685). All this debunks the older Western idea that India, unlike Europe, lacked a sense of history. But as "Lamas and Shamans" shows, such comparisons will not only reveal cultural accomplishments in non-Western contexts but also expose some of their less flattering aspects. Just as Western colonialism had devastating effects on colonized people, so did non-Western forms of domination within Asia. With strong support from the Mongolian rulers who outlawed shamanic practices and perhaps even burned shamans to death, Buddhist monks had shamanic representations of the spirits (*ongyod*), made of felt and wood, as well as the shamans' ritual attire systematically collected and burned, and they exorcised their yurts by burning dog feces in them. Mongolian people were strongly incentivized with gifts to adopt Buddhism, abandon the shamans, and instead turn to Buddhist monks for their ritual needs. Through their power alliance, rulers and monks oppressed shamanic practice and the practitioners, both shamans and lay people. And as we saw, the Buddhist monks, as the new literate elite, framed shamanic beliefs and practices in derogatory ways by imposing their own concepts and terms upon them ("wrong/heretical view," "black *šasin*") and by portraying shamans as illiterate and uncivilized. This reminds us of Christian missionary strategies in America, Africa, and elsewhere, a fact that opens ample opportunities for more comparisons.

Interestingly, despite all those oppressive efforts the Buddhist monks and the ruling elite were unable to eradicate shamanism and fully Buddhicize the Mongolian lands. Even if the term has seen expansions and modifications, it seems telling that a contemporary survey which asks Buryat Mongols to state their religious affiliation lists Shamanism first, followed by Buddhism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Comparative studies could explore whether this may tell us something about the limits of missionary and colonial efforts and the persistence of indigenous culture.

4. The positionality of global historians of religion

While the project of a *Global History of Religion* questions the superiority of Western over non-Western discourses, its comparative insights also challenge the binary of Western vs. non-Western. Aside from some factual geographical and historical differences, such polarizing terms are imprecise, politically charged, and, considering the similarities, rather misleading. But critics might ask: What is the positionality and perspective of those who conduct the above-mentioned comparisons and who write the *Global History of Religion*? Since Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, myself, and others who champion this programmatic approach are Western academics, is it possibly just an extension of the Western discourse on religion and thus only the latest attempt to organize the world in Western terms?

In response to these questions, I wish to make two points, both of which are related to the problematic concept of “the West.” First, in the globalized 21st century it seems difficult to isolate a “Western” discourse. Recent generations have grown up with an increasingly global awareness and, reversely, are less familiar with European intellectual history, Christian concepts, or Greek and Latin terms. Roughly one third of my students in Austin, both undergraduates and graduates, are of Asian descent, most of them second- or third-generation Americans. When such a person is born in the United States into, say, a pious Hindu family, graduates from a secular Ph.D. program in Texas, and then publishes an academic book on Hindu worship with an American university press, does that person count as a “Westerner”? What about the generations of students who have been educated at Asian universities in the past seventy years, partly by professors that were trained at European and American universities? Nor is the “Western discourse” static. Are we sure that the study of Asian cultures and religions in the past 150 years has not impacted the approaches of Western scholarship at all? For example, I see a conspicuous parallel in the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and non-self and the anti-essentialist approach of contemporary religious studies, to which I too subscribe. I wonder if that is mere coincidence.

Second, the phrase “Western discourse on religion” glosses over the diversity and substantial disagreements within that discourse. Especially the gradual emancipation of religious studies from theological approaches seems notable. At German-speaking universities theology is still the dominant academic discourse on religion, with theologians outnumbering religious studies scholars by far. But the *Global History of Religion*, at least in my mind, is a religious studies project, which means that it has no religious agenda, that it studies religion critically—neither affirming or dismissing particular religious expressions or religion in general—and that it explores the cultural expressions that we subsume under the abstract category “religion” as comprehensively as possible. For the latter, it is important to reflect critically on the historical roots of our discipline and the semantic limits of our categories, including “religion.” And it is important to study the intellectual discourses in other parts of the world to explore other semantic ranges and functions of the respective categories.

Of course, we should not expect that non-Western discourses on religion are any less agenda-driven or “theological” than Western ones. While the Buddhist monks in Mongolia did develop a complex comparative terminology in the field of religion, the study of which is highly productive and illuminating, I doubt that many of them would have been interested in adopting a religious studies approach. This is not to suggest that this approach has never been developed outside of the West—Michael Pye’s study of Tominaga Nakamoto’s work provides powerful counterevidence (Pye 1990)—, but in the extant sources theological and apologetic agendas seem much more common and dominant. While the classification systems in non-Western cultures developed at the same time and can be viewed as equivalent to those in the West, religious and missionary interests behind the discourses were often similar too. The religious studies approach grew out of those discourses, but its goal is notably different.

In my view, writing a *Global History of Religion* must be both a global endeavor and a religious studies project. Today scholars of religion with a diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds enrich the religious studies discourse, whether or not they specialize in studying their own cultures. Just as Western scholars of religion can produce excellent scholarship on non-Western cultures, as “Lamas and Shamans” impressively demonstrates, scholars in Mongolia (or Korea, or Malaysia, or Sri Lanka...) could study European discourses and compare them with those in their cultures and languages. Or religious studies scholars in Japan could compare Mongolian and Indonesian classifications of religion. Whatever the respective specialization, all this will enrich the global academic discourse of religious studies. Certainly, power imbalances remain—from language advantages of English speakers to funding opportunities—and need to be addressed. Other conditions too, such as different academic cultures or political and institutional restraints, may keep the number of scholars who are able and willing to engage in this project low. But I would argue that the spirit of a religious studies perspective is not tied to any specific culture and that it allows for a productive global collaboration of like-minded scholars. Following Nina Kollmar-Paulenz’s path-breaking scholarship, together we can expand and enrich our understanding of what religion *can* be.

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