



From the History of Religions in Asia to a Global History of Religion

Christoph Kleine

Published on 29/01/2024

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between two contemporary perspectives on conceptualizing a global history of religion. The first is anchored in an entangled conceptual history, reconstructing the genealogy of “religion” back to the colonial nineteenth century. The second favours a multcentred perspective in studying knowledge systems and general concepts independent of the West and predating global modernity. By analysing Japanese religious history, the article illustrates both the potential for and the necessity of integrating these two approaches.

“ What is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space. The important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable. Secularism—like religion—is such a concept. (Asad 2003: 17)

The article to be discussed in this special issue, titled “Lamas and Shamans—Mongolian Knowledge Orders from the Early 17th to the 21st Century: A Contribution to the Debate on Non-European Concepts of Religion,” originally appeared in 2013 in German as a contribution to a conference proceeding (Schalk et al. 2013) that consolidates the findings of the sixth conference held by the *Arbeitskreis Asiatische Religionsgeschichte* (AKAR) within the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft* (DVRW). The original agenda of AKAR was to have researchers from different fields of the history of religions in Asia present and discuss cross-cutting topics in the study of religion. The founding of the working group was not least motivated by our concern that the history of religions in Asia was becoming increasingly marginalised within the German-speaking study of religion. Very soon after Max Deeg, Oliver Freiberger, and myself had founded AKAR in 1998, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (hereafter: Nina) became an invaluable member of our working group. The sixth conference, held in Leipzig in 2010, specifically engaged with the question, “Is Religion a European Invention?”

Nina deserves credit for being the first in our group to explicitly address and define the contribution of non-European religious histories to a global history of religion. The project of a

Corresponding author: Christoph Kleine, University of Leipzig.

To quote this article: Kleine, Christoph. 2024. “From the History of Religions in Asia to a Global History of Religion.” *ARGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 56–63. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2024.4752.

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global history of religion has since progressed significantly. It is arguably one of the most exciting and challenging fields of historical research within the study of religion. Nina undoubtedly made pioneering efforts in this direction.¹

Roughly simplified, two currents in the global history of religion have emerged in recent years. I would like to refer to one of them as the “Heidelberg School,” represented, among others, by Michael Bergunder, Julian Strube, and Giovanni Maltese. This approach primarily focuses on an entangled discursive and conceptual history. A central argument of this strand of a global religious history is that a global discourse on religion, along with the underlying globalised concept of “religion,” is the result of entangled historical processes that gained momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this way, the protagonists of the “Heidelberg School” make a significant contribution to overcoming a diffusionist Eurocentric perspective, which—as Bergunder very aptly puts it—is based on a “regionalisiertes Ursprungsdenken,” (Bergunder 2020: 48) meaning that it presupposes a Western origin of the concept religion.

Nina adopts a slightly distinct approach by challenging the prevailing focus on the nineteenth century and a restricted perspective on history that exclusively centres on the interactions between “the West and the rest.” This critique has been reiterated by Nina on numerous occasions. As a scholar of Buddhism, she consistently highlights the significance of intra-Asian entanglements, which have yielded profound consequences in shaping comparative concepts transcending regional borders. The emphasis placed on the discourse surrounding religion in global modernity usually neglects entanglements in which Europeans were not involved. It also tends to ignore “the historical existence of non-European knowledge systems that have generated their own analytical conceptualisations.” Non-European cultures are only acknowledged when, and to the extent that, they engage in interactions with “the West.” Consequently, Europe continues to serve as the central point of reference, resulting in a (smoothened) Eurocentric perspective despite the purported global scope of this approach to religious history.

The disregard for pre-colonial non-Western knowledge systems and conceptual histories, a concern rightly expressed by Nina, also leads to hasty conclusions, such as contending the absence of semantic equivalents of the concept of religion or “abstract concepts of order for their religious traditions” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 9). As a rule, however, those who make this claim, have neither taken the effort nor possessed the expertise to engage with the history of non-European classification systems in order to empirically support this assertion.

¹ In contrast to Nina, Bergunder insists that the German term “globale Religionsgeschichte” should not be translated “as ‘global history of religions’ as the latter reminds too much of Eliade’s “Chicago School”, the essentialist universalism of which this new approach strictly opposes.” (Bergunder 2021: 442) I would argue, that “global religious history” is not quite unproblematic either. In this contribution, I use “global history of religion” when I refer to Nina’s approach and “global religious history” when referring to the “Heidelberg school.”

In contrast, Nina delves deeply into the history of concepts and convincingly demonstrates “how a comparative terminology emerged from intellectual reflections of encountering and interacting actors” in Mongolia during the period spanning the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. She concludes that this terminology exemplifies the development of an autonomous domain of “religion” within historical Mongolian societies.

Thus, her approach is not primarily (though potentially) oriented towards historical entanglements between Western and non-Western cultures. She rather intends “to globalize theoretical perspectives on ‘religion’, relinquish Europe’s primacy in favor of a multi-centric viewpoint, and equitably incorporate European and non-European analytical perspectives within the discourse field of ‘religion’” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32). Accordingly, the concept of a global history of religion, in her view, “relies on the premise that the development of secondary orders of knowledge is not exclusive to Europe. Rather, various regions worldwide have developed distinct analytical instruments and knowledge classification systems” (2024: 32).

The question that emerges is whether the two approaches outlined here in a somewhat simplified manner—the modern-centric entangled history approach on one hand, and the polycentric multi-perspective approach on the other—are mutually exclusive or mutually reinforcing, incompatible or complementary. Aside from a creeping rapprochement of these approaches in recent years, I aim to present an argument in favour of not only considering both approaches compatible, but also asserting that their combination is essential for the advancement of a comprehensive global history of religion.

Essentially, the fusion of analyses concerning entangled histories, on the one hand, and the reconstruction of local knowledge systems and terminologies on the other is already suggested and partially explored in Nina’s article. She names the following as “research topics of a global history of religion”:

- local cultural conceptualisations of the field of “religion,”
- historical interactions among different world regions,
- long-term developments from global perspectives,
- micro-studies focusing on regional developments,
- inter-regional and transcultural historical comparisons, and finally,
- possible connections, interdependencies and transfer processes between various knowledge cultures, such as “religion,” “science,” “literature,” and others, in both non-European and European societies.

In my opinion, Nina has succinctly summarised the tasks of a global history of religion. However, one question remains unanswered: to what extent is knowledge of non-European systems of knowledge, conceptual and entangled histories important for understanding the emergence of a global religious discourse in modernity? In other words, why should colleagues, who argue that a global history of religion can only begin in the second half of the nineteenth century onwards—

because only by then did “religion” become a globalised comparative concept—engage with pre-modern or pre-colonial non-European systems of knowledge and conceptual histories?

The answer seems evident. If we agree that the formation of a global discourse around a globalised concept of religion is the product of intense transcultural exchange, it is crucial to understand what each participant contributed to this discourse. What historical experiences, cultural imprints, epistemic structures, and conceptual resources underpin the local contributions to the global discourse? This question must be addressed if we genuinely aim to emancipate ourselves from maintaining “that ‘religion’ has its historical ‘origin’ in the ‘West/Europe,’ and that this would make ‘religion’ a ‘European/Western’ concept” (Bergunder 2021: 447).

No doubt, ten years after Nina presented her program for a global history of religion in Leipzig, significant progress has been made in this field. This progress can arguably be attributed, at least in part, to Nina’s interventions. The contribution of non-Western actors to the global discourse on religion is now widely recognised. The development of the field is well documented in the special issue titled “Global Religious History” of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. Edited by Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube in 2021, the issue exemplifies the latest developments of the “Heidelberg School.” Maltese and Strube make a compelling argument in their introduction:

“ Instead of assuming that a “Western understanding of religion” has been exported into the rest of the world, and “non-Westerners” merely reacted to that export, meanings of religion are understood as something fundamentally unstable. Actors outside of “the West” actively and decisively participated on debates that attempted to “fixate” the meaning of religion. (Maltese/Strube 2021: 230)

However, the contributions of actors outside of “the West” are still mainly conceived of as mere reactions to the epistemic challenges posed by the West—which they undoubtedly were. It remains somewhat unclear, however, in what indigenous conceptual resources and epistemic structures non-Western contributions to the fixation of the meaning of religion were grounded. Hence, Nina’s call for the reconstruction of “non-European knowledge systems” and the “analytical conceptualisations” engendered by them remains unanswered.

Therefore, although there exists a slight difference between Nina’s approach to a global history of religion and the Heidelberg approach to a religious global history in terms of empirical focus, they are in no way antithetical but rather complementary. The “Heidelberg School” directs its attention towards a global entangled discursive and conceptual history that can be traced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century, whereas Nina emphasises the importance of conceptual histories and the development of knowledge systems and general concepts independent of the West and predating global modernity. To be sure, Bergunder does not deny the significance of engaging with “historical phenomena that traditionally belong to the scope of religious studies.” He insists, however, that “the starting point is always a present-day global understanding” (Bergunder 2021: 458) of these phenomena.

As far as I understand it, this represents the divide between a critical genealogy favoured by Bergunder, and Nina's polycentric-multiperspective approach to the history of religion. In this short article, I aim to show that this divide can be easily bridged.

First and foremost, I wholeheartedly concur with Bergunder's assertion that "History emerges as a function of the present" and, consequently, the "entry point for any research can only be the contemporary global usage of general terms, never any supposed 'origin' or 'forerunners' in the past" (Bergunder 2021: 456). I have no doubt that Nina, as a historian, would also endorse these statements. In historical research, it is widely accepted that historical investigations take place within the epistemological framework of the present, using materials available in the present and addressing issues relevant to the present. Nonetheless, divergences may become evident when it comes to the practical consequences of acknowledging the situatedness of historical research in the present.

While Nina seems fully aware that her research takes its starting point from the "contemporary global usage of general terms," she does not engage in genealogical critique in the way Bergunder advocates. One could accuse Nina (and many others) of attempting a "direct leap into the past," which, according to Bergunder, "is not possible" (Bergunder 2021: 449).

I would raise the objection, and I find myself in alignment with Nina's perspective, that genealogical critique holds significant importance, and indeed, it is an indispensable approach in the global history of religion. However, it is not the sole valid approach. The investigation into the origins of the "contemporary global usage of general terms" is not always the primary focus, even though it may consistently reverberate in the background. Moreover, it would not be practically feasible to consistently meet the stringent requirements of a genealogical critique while simultaneously generating comprehensive insights into pre-modern orders of knowledge, classification systems, and the use of general terms or comparative concepts in diverse cultures.

Furthermore, one crucial question that holds immense significance to me (and I believe to Nina as well) still remains unanswered: How can I, in a genealogical manner, write a history of general terms that emerge as potential semantic equivalents of religion in other linguistic systems? If the starting point of my research is the globalised general term "religion"—and I align with Bergunder's stance that it is an "empty signifier," a mere "name" the meaning of which becomes fixated only through constant repetition—, then how can I undertake a genealogy of constant repetition, encompassing the "re-signification" of non-European and pre-modern "names" and "empty signifiers," all while remaining within the realm of a religious global history that commences only in the latter half of the nineteenth century? "Genealogical critique," says Bergunder, "asks about the immediate pre-history of the present and then about the immediate pre-history of this pre-history. The aim is to explore historically how far today's discourse can be continuously traced back into the past" (2021: 456). However, if the continuous tracing ends at the point in history where the designation "religion" is no longer (i.e., not yet) employed, then the genealogical endeavour would never extend into the domain of pre-modern non-European

religious history. As a result, the exact outcome that Nina rightfully criticises would manifest itself—a significant disregard for “the historical existence of non-European knowledge systems that have generated their own analytical conceptualisations” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 7) within the purview of a global history of religion.

I am, however, firmly convinced that the postulates of genealogical critique can indeed be applied within the framework and in the service of a global history of religion without excluding “non-European knowledge systems” with their distinct “analytical conceptualisations” from our research.

In the context of the project “Multiple Secularities—Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,”² in which Nina participated as a fellow, I have consistently endeavoured to demonstrate this using Japan as my historical example. Due to space limitations, I can only provide a brief indication of the steps and outcomes here. The central question of our project is genuinely genealogical: How have present global discourses concerning “secularity” (i.e., concerning the boundaries between the religious and the secular) unfolded historically? Using Bergunder’s terminology, this endeavour involves tracing “the chain of repetition, on which a general term is based, back into the past” (Bergunder 2021: 456). For now, let us concentrate on the term “religion,” as “secularity” is inconceivable without it.

First and foremost, we must pose the question of whether discourses surrounding the Japanese term *shūkyō* 宗教 are part of a global discourse on religion at all. I am inclined to believe that we are indeed dealing with entangled discourses here, which nevertheless each possess their own distinct characteristics. However, for the time being, I would like to set aside this issue. After all, the term *shūkyō* serves as the standard translation for “religion,” and every academic and non-academic work translated from a European language into Japanese employs “*shūkyō*” to represent “religion.” One could now inquire “about the immediate pre-history” of the usage of the term in the “present and then about the immediate pre-history of this pre-history,” in order “to explore historically how far today’s discourse can be continuously traced back into the past” (Bergunder 2021: 456).

In my project and within this paper, my primary concern revolves around the inquiry of how to proceed at the historical juncture where the term “*shūkyō*” (in its present “sedimented” and “materialised” meaning) is no longer employed (i.e., not yet in conventional chronology). To the best of my knowledge, this point occurs in 1866, when the term “*shūkyō*” was initially used for translating the European term “religion” (Krämer 2015: 44).

However, simultaneously and in analogous contexts of application, terms like *shūmon* 宗門, *shūshi* 宗旨, and *shūhō* 宗法 were also extensively used. With the conclusion of the so-called “unequal treaties” between Japan and leading Western nations starting from 1858, conceptual entanglements emerged and discursive knots were tied. When concepts from two languages—

² See www.multiple-secularities.de.

here “religion” on one side, and *shūmon*, *shūshi*, *shūhō*, and *shūkyō* on the other—become actively related to each other as a result of cultural encounters, such as in the practice of translation, our genealogical backward movement has led us to a point where two conceptual histories meet and start to interact. In line with my specific research focus, I typically embark on the path that leads back to Japanese pre-modernity. Notably, the terms *shūshi* and *shūmon* are ubiquitous in the nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth centuries, primarily serving as signifiers for Buddhism and Christianity. Then, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we encounter yet another, albeit more loosely tied discursive knot. Through the Jesuit mission and the encounter between Japanese and Europeans, “religion” and “*shūshi*” or “*shūmon*” were employed as equivalents. The discourse on competing systems of orientation and socio-cultural formations employing these and other terms can be genealogically traced back even further to the late eighth century (Kleine 2019; 2023).

This should suffice as an example to demonstrate that, starting from the interest in a global history of religion, it is possible to write pre-modern and non-Western histories of concepts and discourses beyond the repeated use of the “empty signifier” “religion” in modern times. I contend that such an approach is not only possible but imperative. Otherwise, we fail to understand the emergence of a global discourse on religion, inclusive of the contributions made by non-Western participants. If we genuinely acknowledge the role played by, for instance, the Japanese in the globalisation of the concept of religion and the associated discourse, it is incumbent upon us to consider the epistemic conditions under which they engaged in the discourse and to ask to what indigenous conceptual resources they resorted. Consequently, the scope of genealogical critique must not terminate at the onset of the global discourse on religion; rather, it must encompass its local prehistories, as well as their antecedents and so forth. Through this undertaking, one inevitably arrives at the juncture where local cultural conceptualisations of the field of “religion,” historical interactions among different world regions, micro-studies focusing on regional developments, inter-regional and transcultural historical comparisons, and finally, possible connections, interdependencies and transfer processes between various knowledge cultures come into sharper focus.

We should perhaps think of the concept of religion and the corresponding discourse as a river that has various tributaries. If we want to understand how the river was formed, we have to know the tributaries. A genealogical global history of religion would have to start from the mouth of the river and go upstream until we reach a confluence of two rivers or brooks. Depending on inclination and expertise, we will decide which of the tributaries to follow further upstream. In other words: The river does not originate where—seen from the mouth—two streams converge for the first time.

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About the author

Christoph Kleine is professor of the History of Religions at Leipzig University, Germany, and co-director of the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences *Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities*. His principal research areas include the religious history of Japan and East Asian Buddhism, with a special focus on Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. Among his recent publications is the article, “When Christianity Became a Shūshi 宗旨: Cultural Encounters and Comparisons Between Europe and Japan and the Origins of a Global History of Religion.” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 10 (2023), 1–25.

Mail: c.kleine@uni-leipzig.de