

## Abstract

Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz presents an approach to religious studies that combines source interpretation with critical theoretical reflection. She questions European dominance in defining religion and argues for a globalised, multicentric method that includes European and non-European perspectives on an equal footing. However, her approach still faces the challenge of decentralising Europe as the primary conceptual reference in this field.

---

## 1. Introduction

In “Lamas and Shamans,” Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (2024) demonstrates an approach to religious studies which combines careful source interpretation with critical theoretical reflection. Her concept of global religious history (*globale Religionsgeschichte*) confronts the Eurocentrism embedded in contemporary religious studies. Her analysis suggests that the “postcolonial debates” on the definition of religion primarily consist of the critique of “the application of the European concept of ‘religion’ to non-European contexts” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 7; 2013: 152). This critique often presupposes that regions outside Europe have not developed a terminology of “religion” as “an autonomous social sphere,” or a “socio-politically significant segment” of society (2024: 10; 2013: 155–156). Simultaneously, she notes a “peculiar timelessness” in the way non-European pre-colonial “knowledge systems” are considered (2024: 30; 2013: 184), which seem to gain their legitimacy only “through their engagement with and incorporation of European ideas” (2024: 30; 2013: 184). Instead, she presents the idea of a global religious history that “challenges European hegemony over the analytical concept of ‘religion’” (2024: 32; 2013: 187). Her approach seeks to “globalize theoretical perspectives on ‘religion,’ relinquish Europe’s primacy in favour of a multi-centric viewpoint, and equitably incorporate European and non-European analytical perspectives within the discourse field of ‘religion’” (2024: 32; 2013: 186). Though Kollmar-Paulenz attempts to meaningfully decentralise Europe as the primary reference point for conceptualising religion, her approach risks not going far enough.

## 2. Today's use of "religion"

Kollmar-Paulenz believes that there is currently a universal global concept or use of "religion". She demonstrates this through the example of the use of "religion" in the Mongolian language. She highlights that in today's Mongolian language there is a "widely accepted" use of "šasin" ("religion") in contemporary Mongolian "academic discourse" and society. This includes "Buddhism", "shamanism", "Russian Orthodoxy" and "Protestantism" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 29; 2013: 181–182). According to Kollmar-Paulenz, "religion" has come to be used as a universal, globally applicable concept due to "glocalization", which is a merger of global and local linguistic usages. Her approach, however, is open to criticism for several reasons. Firstly, she conflates "global" with "Western" therefore presumes a "globalized, primarily Protestant-influenced 'Western' religious discourse" (2024: 26; 2013: 178). Secondly, in her view, what is deemed global is essentially local because it is "Western." Therefore, her interpretation does not portray glocalisation in its literal sense; instead, it represents the fusion of two distinct local contexts, whereby "Western" and Mongolian interpretations reflect their "respective orders of knowledge and conceptions of the world" (2024: 26; 2013: 177). Kollmar-Paulenz emphasises the "simultaneity and equivalence of various particular cultures of knowledge" (2024: 9; 2013: 155). Accordingly, she differentiates between "Western" and Mongolian aspects in the use of *šasin*, whilst accounting for the fact that "[t]oday, European-American discourses on 'religion' have been incorporated into Mongolian epistemic systems" (2024: 11; 2013: 157). On the one hand, she attributes the current categorisation of "shamanism" as a full-fledged "religion" predominantly to "Western" influence:

“ The uniquely Mongolian "shamanism" discourse, which had established a "teaching of the shamans" long before the European construction of "shamanism" as a distinct religious category, has merged with the European-American "religion discourse" that integrates everyday religious practices into its concept of shamanism. (2024: 28; 2013: 181)

Accordingly, she writes that "in many contemporary Mongolian accounts, the Mongols possess two religions, shamanism and Buddhism" (2024: 29; 2013: 181). On the other hand, she attributes today's characterisation of Buddhism as *šasin* primarily to developments within Mongolia, to which she devotes a large part of her article. Arguably, it is Kollmar-Paulenz, and not the Mongolians, who distinguish between these two systems of knowledge—a "Western" and a "Mongolian" one—and who projects this distinction onto the contemporary Mongolian understanding of *šasin*. As a result, she appears to refute the existence of a general Mongolian term for "religion" suitable for the present context. This perspective denies Mongolians the opportunity to authentically engage with a global discourse, as the global discourse remains inherently foreign and "Western." Only the "West" is regarded as capable of merging the local with the global, since the global is simply a reiteration of the Western local. This seems to suggest that non-European religious studies, such as those in Mongolia, are lacking agency in their current application of the concept of religion in their respective contexts, while European religious

studies, as the seeming originator of the concept, can maintain its usage without challenge. Thus, Kollmar-Paulenz implicitly acknowledges that the “European concept of religion” remains the foundation of religious studies, serving as the prototype for integrating non-European “knowledge systems” into the discipline.

### 3. The European concept of religion as a prototype for the point of comparison

Through the way that Kollmar-Paulenz frames her comparison of the concept, usage, and evolution of religion, she risks perpetuating Eurocentrism. Kollmar-Paulenz’s articulation of what constitutes the “European concept of religion” remains ambiguous. In an earlier work, she vaguely refers to the religion’s “entire spectrum of meaning,” which ranges from “ritual practices to an individual’s personal relationship with a transcendent counterpart” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 3). Generally, she posits that we are dealing with “a particular concept that has been universalized from a specific historical tradition” making it a “a futile endeavor” to “strip the concept of its historical particularity” (2014: 9; 2013: 154). In other words, “religion” is a term that originated in Europe, it is a “‘child’ of Europe, the European Enlightenment, and Protestantism” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 3). Subsequently, religion, as a “European” concept, was imposed upon the rest of the world through colonialism. However, asserting a European origin and content of the term “religion” implies that its meaning has remained unchanged from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Kollmar-Paulenz primarily challenges the Eurocentric assertion that no “analogous” notions akin to “religion” have evolved outside of Europe. In her work, she posits a novel paradigm in comparative religious studies, the existence outside of Europe of pre-colonial terms demonstrating, “functional equivalence to the European category of ‘religion’” (2014: 15; 2013: 162), as attested by the Mongolian example.

However, this approach may inadvertently perpetuate the form of comparison which, as Joachim Matthes (1992) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) argue, privileges and reifies Europe. To understand this problem, it is important to note that every comparison operates in two phases (Bergunder 2016). First, we must establish the point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*); this enables us, in a second step, to proceed with the actual comparison. The validity of a comparison depends on the justification of the point of comparison, which itself cannot be critiqued through the comparison but is, instead, affirmed by it. By adopting the European concept of religion as the point of comparison, both the concept and its historical context become the prototype from which this comparative framework is developed. As Chakrabarty contends, the consequence is that all non-European elements of the comparison are inevitably addressed only “in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into ‘inadequacy’” (2008: 32).

In other words, non-European comparative elements, such as those in the Mongolian context, are inherently unable to fully conform to the European prototype. History in Asia and elsewhere has unfolded differently than in Europe, with each historical event being distinct and uniquely differentiated from all others. For instance, the European debate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which

Kollmar-Paulenz believes shaped the European concept of religion, is a singular event, defined by its specific historical context. This event could not have possibly repeated itself identically elsewhere. Therefore, if the content of a general term is abstracted from a specific European debate of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then all specific non-European elements—which must inherently exist in the light of the different historical context—automatically become deficiencies. This renders the quest for “analogies” problematic in two ways: First, the comparison affirms the point of comparison, thereby solidifying the European concept of religion as its prototype. Second, all non-European elements, when compared to this European prototype, inherently carry a pre-existing deficiency.

#### 4. Thinking in terms of regionalised origins

Kollmar-Paulenz risks essentialising and de-historicising pre-colonial history. Against the backdrop of her stated assumption that a European concept of religion was imposed on the rest of the world since the era of colonialism, Kollmar-Paulenz seems to believe that non-European “knowledge systems” can only be adequately understood through pre-colonial sources. Consequently, she repeatedly criticises postcolonial approaches that attribute contemporary global discourses solely to colonialism (Kollmar-Paulenz 2023), viewing this as a fundamental misdirection. She argues that such perspectives serve only to recount and thereby affirm the colonial spread of a “Western” concept of religion. However, her alternative proposal may risk reconstructing contemporary non-European “knowledge systems” directly from pre-colonial sources, paralleling the derivation of the “Western” concept of religion from the European 19<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, Kollmar-Paulenz potentially traces each present-day “knowledge system” back to a specific regionalised origin—for instance, the “Western” knowledge system from the European 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Mongolian system from the Mongolian 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, if this were the case, the global colonial and postcolonial discourse on religion would have taken place—and still takes place—between pre-colonial established concepts of religion which, due to their different historical origins, exhibit a difference that cannot be mediated. This approach risks reviving, in a revised form, the “chimeras of the origin” (Foucault 1977: 144), which Kollmar-Paulenz aims to surpass.

#### 5. Genealogical critique

It is paramount to emphasise that the future direction of religious studies should aim to redirect contemporary religious discourse away from its Eurocentric tendencies, ensuring the inclusion and anchoring of previously marginalised non-European voices. Additionally, there is a necessity to historicise the present-day global religious discourse in a manner that integrally recognises pre-colonial non-European sources. The criticisms of Kollmar-Paulenz’s approach in addressing the issue of Eurocentrism stems from her leaning towards a specific strand of postcolonial historiography, which posits that today’s world is the result of a “Western” knowledge system, presumably solidified by the 18<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier. However, though this assertion has been

presented as self-evident it has not been historically substantiated. Firstly, this is evidenced by the fact that on a global scale, the term “religion” is established not only in Europe but also in all non-European languages and regions (Peterson/Walhof 2002). By capturing the contemporary usages of “religion” as it is actually practised worldwide, without tracing it back to a supposedly pre-existing specific regional origin, effectively already decentralises Europe. A contemporary understanding of the concept of religion should encompass its current usage across both European and non-European contexts, without any region claiming interpretative supremacy. More specifically, the contemporary Mongolian-language religious discourse is a constitutive part of the global discourse on religion and its inclusion is vital for any current discussion about religion. On closer inspection, Kollmar-Paulenz appears to align with these views, as she explicitly bemoans the lack of empirical studies on this subject (2014: 11, FN 20; 2013: 157, FN 20).

If we posit a global discourse on religion for the present day, then the notion of a “European concept of religion” must also be situated in the here and now. Such an assertion implies one of two possible scenarios. First, labelling a phenomenon as “European” might suggest its exclusivity to Europe in a given context. This claim, however, presupposes a global perspective for its validation. Given that the central terms of religious studies, including “religion,” are not regionally confined, this perspective may not warrant further exploration at this point. If purely regional confines do not apply, a second interpretation arises: Within the current global discourse, any regional designation signifies a claim to hegemony that aspires to epitomise a general concept, essentially becoming its prototype. For example, “German beer,” transcends the notion of being merely a product of Germany. Instead, it represents a commercially driven assertion by certain German breweries who claim to produce the world’s finest beer, an assertion usually rooted in regional German origins and German Purity Law (*Deutsches Reinheitsgebot*). This notion, equating authentic beer with German beer, while globally acknowledged, is vigorously contested by non-German breweries.

In the same way “German” in “German beer” implies a claim of superiority or prototypicality, the “European” in “European concept of religion” suggests that the European interpretation of religion is seen as either superior or the prototype for other forms of religion. It is, therefore, imperative to critically examine the discourse surrounding the “European concept of religion” as a manifestation of Europe’s contemporary hegemonic stance over the global understanding of religion (Bergunder 2021). In this reflection, we should also include the role of religious studies in Europe and North America, whose current hegemony is clearly reflected in their considerable resources (research funds, institutions, publishers, journals, etc.) and which thus exert a greater interpretative influence than the rest of the world. Second, the historicisation of religion can only be carried out after its present global usage has already been established. This approach prevents the present from being derived from an assumed prior origin, which aligns with Michel Foucault’s genealogical theory of history, wherein genealogical critique subverts the traditional chronological timeline by starting the historicisation of today’s general terms from the present.

The objective is, therefore, to determine the extent to which the contemporary global usage of “religion” can be traced back through history, that is, a genealogical tracing back from the present to the past. Crucially, the immediate history of religion must necessarily be conceived as a global history (Bergunder 2020; 2021). If “religion” is used globally today and this current global use is seen as a key characteristic, then religion must by definition have a global pre-history. As soon as this global pre-history—understood as the genealogical tracing back from the present to the past—transitions into different regional ones, it is a decisive historical discontinuity, because a key characteristic is then lost. The length of the genealogical tracing of a term’s pre-history depends on the point of discontinuity identified with the past, which varies according to specific research interests. This retracing often culminates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of global entanglements through colonialism. Contrary to Kollmar-Paulenz’s assumption, recent historical research on global religious history suggests that there was hardly a linear dissemination of a religious concept rooted in Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, we are dealing with a globally intertwined history in which the colonised were active agents, significantly influencing Europe in return (Bergunder 2020). In this vein, Kollmar-Paulenz’s own depiction of Mongolian and Tibetan religious discourses since the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not represent passive, enforced adoptions of a prior European understanding of religion (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013; 2023; 2024). Her own research, therefore, somewhat contradicts her own assumption.

From this perspective, the pre-colonial era before the 19<sup>th</sup> century emerges as a series of regional pre-histories of what would become today’s religious discourse. Tracing back beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century is indispensable, even if it is argued that a contemporary global discourse can only be traced to the colonial era. Only through such a historical examination can a decisive discontinuity relative to the pre-colonial period be empirically validated. Typically, we encounter numerous regional discourses that refute the notion of a single regional origin of religion in Europe, even though these regional contexts may have already been interconnected beyond their geographic confines. The crucial insight, which cannot be emphasised enough, is that all regions of the world must be equally considered in exploring these regional pre-histories. Europe, therefore, holds just one of many regional pre-histories, and is formally on an equal footing with, for instance, Mongolian history. This genealogical approach categorically opposes any prior privileging of a European origin. The most significant, and perhaps under-acknowledged, outcome of this approach is that even today’s use of “religion” within European Christianity can be traced back only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and must also be understood as a result of a global negotiation process. This claim is well-supported by historical sources (Turner 2024).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that genealogy, in the sense of Michel Foucault, represents a categorical rejection of any positivist view of history. Here, history is always a function of the present, and from an epistemological standpoint, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are no closer to us than the 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is no “new” origin of contemporary global religious discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a discontinuity must be reassessed for each research topic. For certain research questions, other discontinuities might be more relevant. At any rate, reverting to a

mindset focused on historical origins, which genealogy fundamentally aims to transcend, should be diligently avoided. Therefore, genealogical critique does not privilege recent history but is interested in all historical assertions used to legitimise hegemonic claims in the present (Bergunder: forthcoming).

All the considerations presented here are intended to serve as impulses for further discussion on a global religious history, which Kollmar-Paulenz initially sparked. I am confident that she herself will continue to shape this debate substantively.

## Bibliography

- Bergunder, Michael. 2016. "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion." In *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, ed. by Perry Schmidt-Leukel / Andreas Nehring. London: Bloomsbury, 34–52.
- Bergunder, Michael. 2020. "Umkämpfte Historisierung. Die Zwillingsgeburt von 'Religion' und 'Esoterik' in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und das Programm einer globalen Religionsgeschichte." In *Wissen um Religion*, ed. by Klaus Hock. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 47–131.
- Bergunder, Michael. 2021. "Global Religious History in Theory and Practice." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, 441–462.
- Bergunder, Michael. forthcoming. "Encounters of the Brahmanical Sanskrit Tradition with Persian Scholarship in the Mughal Empire. Genealogical Critique and the Relevance of the Pre-colonial Past in a Global Religious History." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 9.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2008. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977 [1971]. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Michel Foucault: Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. with an introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, transl. by Donald F. Bouchard / Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 139–164.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2007. *Zur Ausdifferenzierung eines autonomen Bereichs Religion in asiatischen Gesellschaften des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts: Das Beispiel der Mongolen*. Bern: Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2013. "Lamas und Schamanen: Mongolische Wissensordnungen vom frühen 17. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur Debatte um aussereuropäische Religionsbegriffe." In *Religion in Asien? Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. by Peter Schalk / Max Deeg / Oliver Freiberger / Christoph Kleine / Astrid van Nahl, Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 151–200.

- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2023. "Nga Rang Gi Chos Khyod Rang Gi Chos: 'My Religion and Your Religion'?" About Some Fundamental Issues in the Global History of Religion." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 1–20 (online ahead of print). <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10082>.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2024. "Lamas and Shamans: Mongolian Orders of Knowledge from the Early 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A Contribution to the Debate on Non-European Concepts of Religion." *AYGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 6–47.
- Matthes, Joachim. 1992. "The Operation Called 'Vergleichen.'" In *Zwischen den Kulturen?*, ed. by Joachim Matthes. Göttingen: Schwartz, 75–99.
- Peterson, Derek R. / Darren R. Walhof, eds. 2002. *The Invention of Religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Turner, Mathias. 2024. "The Indian Challenge: Indology and New Conceptions of Christianity as 'Religion' at the End of the Nineteenth Century." In *Religious Entanglements Between Germans and Indians, 1800–1945*, ed. by Isabella Schwaderer / Gerdien Jonker. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 59–87.

## About the author

**Michael Bergunder** is a Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Heidelberg. His areas of interest include theories and methods in religious studies, Tamil religious history, the history of esotericism, and the study of global Pentecostalism.

Mail: [michael.bergunder@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:michael.bergunder@uni-heidelberg.de)

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Judith Bachmann, Anja Kirsch, Giovanni Maltese, Andrea Rota and Julian Strube for their critical comments on an earlier version of this text, as well as ChatGPT and the language editor Akeem D. Adagbada for assistance with the English language.