



Why *Global History of Religion*? A Response to Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz

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Abstract

The contribution discusses Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's programme for a global history of religion. Her approach aims to challenge European hegemony over the analytical concept of 'religion' by incorporating non-European realms of experience into theories of religious studies. This provokes the question which epistemological interest is associated with this objective. Why should an academic discipline, whose theories and concepts are shaped by European discourses, integrate non-European perspectives? Several possible answers to this question are examined.

The programme of a global history of religion (*globale Religionsgeschichte*, also translated as *global religious history*), as formulated by Kollmar-Paulenz and other predominantly German-speaking scholars, combines a historical perspective specific to the discipline since its inception with theoretical impulses that have shaped methodological debates in recent decades. From the outset, religious studies, unlike most other historical and social science disciplines, has understood its subject, religion, as a global phenomenon, transcending the confines of European history. A global perspective has been integral to the tradition of the field, sometimes referred to as *comparative religion*. However, historical research has traditionally focused on a segmental history of religions, centring on the religions of specific regions or peoples, or the history of individual world religions. Even though the mutual influence of religious traditions was not overlooked, it was only with the growing interest in the religious history of modernity towards the end of the last century that increased attention was given to the global interdependence of developments.

Simultaneously, theoretical debates in religious studies have fundamentally questioned the traditional understanding of religion as a universal phenomenon, identifying the concept of religion as a construct of modern European discourses. From this perspective, the global use of the term 'religion' could be interpreted as a result of the hegemony of European knowledge orders initiated by colonialism. Kollmar-Paulenz does not dispute this view, especially concerning the word 'religion' in global discourses conducted in English. However, she argues that in non-European Asian societies, independently of the influence of European taxonomies, terms were

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developed that can be translated as 'religion.' She supports this argument by examining the development of Mongolian knowledge orders from the 17th century onwards and the genealogy of words whose meanings overlap significantly with that of the word 'religion' in modern discourses. In particular, the word *šasin* underwent a broadening of meaning during this time as a generic term, initially encompassing only Buddhism but later incorporating Mongolian shamanism, Christianity, and other religions.

What significance does this finding have for a global history of religion? Two of the points mentioned by Kollmar-Paulenz seem particularly important to me, as they indicate possibilities for the emancipation of religious studies from the predominance of Western discourses and taxonomies. The first point concerns the observation that the modern Mongolian word *šasin*, used to translate 'religion,' was not formed in reaction to the confrontation with Western notions and knowledge but has its own independent history. The genealogy of this word, and this is the second point, shows that its meaning, much like the European word 'religion,' underwent changes. This transformation was not triggered solely by Western influences but was conditioned by endogenous factors of Mongolian society, the interdependence of Mongolian and Tibetan knowledge orders, and the dynamics of power relations. In this context, Kollmar-Paulenz criticises the widespread view that the knowledge orders of Asian societies lacked dynamic development before the colonial encounters with Europe.

From this well-founded finding based on philological analysis, one can conclude that there were discourses about religion *avant la lettre* in the Mongolian and Tibetan language areas. For a global history of religion in Kollmar-Paulenz's understanding, this means that Mongolian and other Asian discourses about religion deserve as much attention as European ones:

“ Consequently, a global history of religion challenges European hegemony over the analytical concept of 'religion.' It adopts a multi-perspectivity that relates European and non-European analytical perspectives within the discourse field of 'religion'. (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32; 2013: 187)

I understand this formulation as a programme outlining the objectives of global religious history. It seems that it is not about examining historical phenomena classified as 'religion' in global discourses but rather about investigating the discourses in which religion as a subject is constructed and discussed. Given the fact that the worldwide use of the word 'religion' (and its translations) was initiated by European discourses and thereby, a specific, mostly Protestant-influenced understanding of religion became predominant, the call is made to overcome this lopsidedness in religious studies by paying attention to non-European knowledge orders and their understanding of religion. Only then, one could argue, can the academic discourse on religion become a global discourse.

This argument is coherent and offers little reason for criticism. Perhaps one could argue that the genesis of religious studies occurred within the context of European knowledge orders and, therefore, both the understanding of religion and of science are fundamentally shaped by

European discourses. One might question whether it is possible to participate in the academic discourse on religion without simultaneously accepting the rules to which religious studies discourses are subjected. If the integration of Asian or African perspectives on religion is carried out by European or Western scholars, global dominance of the European understanding of religious studies is maintained. Under these conditions, global religious history would continue to be a research approach dependent on Western discourses, and Asian or African knowledge orders would gain global significance only by being integrated into a Western knowledge system. I am not sure if Kollmar-Paulenz understands the programme of global history of religion in this sense. An alternative interpretation could be to understand it as a more radical enterprise, challenging not only European hegemony over the concept of religion but also over the concept of religious studies.

However, Kollmar-Paulenz emphasises that the European imprint of the notion of religion and religious studies cannot be abolished (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 9; 2013: 154). The question of whether and how semantic, functional, or structural equivalents of religion are addressed in non-European discourses is necessarily posed against the backdrop of religious studies discourses. The fact that their central concepts are of European origin:

“ [...] should not lead to a rejection of a common academic vocabulary. Instead, we should use it in a controlled and reflective manner to ensure that we do not lose sight of the nuances and complexities of our subject matter. (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 9; 2013: 155)

It is not entirely clear what is meant by ‘subject matter’ in this context. The subsequent elaborations suggest that the subject matter of global religious history comprises discourses about religion and discourses about words whose meanings overlap with that of ‘religion’ or are used as translations of ‘religion.’ *Global religious history* could then be understood as *global discursive study of religion*.

I suspect that Kollmar-Paulenz would only partially agree with this interpretation. A central concern of her approach is to emphasise that in non-European knowledge orders, there were discourses about religion before the European word was known. On what basis can one claim that, for example, Mongolian discourses in which the words *šasin* or *nom* acquired their meanings can be interpreted as discourses about ‘religion’? Perhaps it suffices that *šasin* is used today as a translation of ‘religion.’ However, the genealogy of the usage of this word can only provide insight into the nuances of the meaning of *šasin*. Only when Mongolian actors are heard in the global discourse on religion would the genealogy of *šasin* become part of the genealogy of a globalised understanding of *religion*. I doubt that Western historians of religion can take on this task on behalf of others, and I see no reason why they should.

Kollmar-Paulenz’s concern is different. She aims to broaden the perspective of religious studies, seeking to overcome its limitation by the hegemony of European knowledge orders. In a later publication, the focus on academic discourses becomes apparent:

“ If we do not want to abandon the use of a common scientific language from the outset, we need to explore whether there is a possibility to develop transculturally applicable analytical concepts that include different worlds of experience beyond the privileged taxonomies of Anglo-American knowledge cultures. (Kollmar-Paulenz 2023: 14–15)

Global religious history considers that “secondary orders of knowledge” and classification systems were developed outside Europe. Despite the differences in content that may exist compared to European knowledge orders, “these systems can be brought into functional and structural analogy with each another and in this way, explored comparatively” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32; 2013: 187). Of particular interest is, of course, a functional and structural analogy between the meanings of the word ‘religion’ and conceptually similar notions in pre-modern non-European discourses. By considering these concepts, European and non-European perspectives should be equally included in the “discursive field of ‘religion’” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024:32; 2013: 187). In this way, “[o]ur European conceptualisations are thus adapted and modified by the inclusion of non-European worlds of experience” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2023: 15).

For Kollmar-Paulenz, global history of religion aims to integrate non-European understandings of religion into the theories of religious studies. Referring to Richard King, she asks, “Why should theorists be limited by the Western framing of the debate?” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 31; 2013: 186). There is no compelling reason for this, aside from the fact that most social science theorists have little knowledge of non-Western debates. However, one could also ask in reverse: Why should theorists not limit themselves to the Western framing of the debate on religion? In other words, what epistemological interest is behind the demand to expand and modify religious studies discourses or theories about religion by integrating non-European perspectives? Is there something that can only be recognised under this condition?

The question of epistemological interest concerns the programme of global religious history and religious studies as a whole. What do we want to recognise, and for what purpose? The question is fundamental, and it would be too much to ask for an answer from Kollmar-Paulenz. However, the programme of global religious history provokes the question of why we want to integrate non-European perspectives into religious studies discourses and “relinquish Europe’s primacy in favor of a multi-centric viewpoint” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32; 2013: 186). After all, most social sciences are quite comfortable with the fact that their theories are guided by Western perspectives. What are the arguments for integrating non-Western perspectives?

One could point out that post-colonial approaches are nowadays part of the standard repertoire of religious studies and do not require further justification. It is commonplace that European knowledge orders (like all others) emerged under specific historical conditions and their hegemonic position in global discourses is based on the political and economic power of the West, if not on its colonial expansion. Therefore, considering European knowledge superior to

other knowledge cultures is unfounded, and giving the latter equal attention is a matter of fairness. This would be a moral argument.

Theoretically more challenging is the further argument that religious studies, dominated by European concepts and theories, is methodologically naïve by reifying words like 'religion' and treating religion as something existing outside of discourses. Considering non-European knowledge cultures can show us that the European understanding of religion lacks universal validity. In this context, a goal of global religious history could be to criticise the hegemonic claim of the Western understanding of religion with the epistemological interest to explore "the historical conditions (power relations, implicit exclusions, claims of equivalence, etc.) that make hegemonic claims in today's knowledge production possible" (Maltese/Strube 2021: 244).

Critique of established knowledge is undoubtedly one of the core tasks of any science, at least according to modern Western understanding. As far as criticism of a naïve understanding of religion as an identifiable universal thing is concerned, this does not require a global history of religion. This criticism has been firmly established in methodological debates in religious studies for several decades. This should not prevent anyone from proceeding with exposing the colonial entanglements of religious studies and its concepts. Still, it seems to me more pressing to ask what epistemological interest religious studies can pursue after the dependency of the concept of religion on Western discourses and power relations has been recognised.

Kollmar-Paulenz's contribution stimulates a possible answer to this question. According to her understanding of global religious history, the analysis of discourses about religion does not need to be limited to those discourses that occurred under the influence of European global hegemony since the 19th century. She shows that even before the spread of the originally European notion of religion, Mongolian and Tibetan actors organised knowledge about social formations conceptually in a similar way to European actors in the modern era. Like in Western discourses, these concepts underwent changes in meaning and were disputed. They were not shaped in discourses about 'religion' because the word 'religion' was unknown. But words were used that, according to the understanding of the speakers and writers, referred to social formations that are labelled as 'religion' by modern Western observers. This could be a coincidental parallel.

It is part of Kollmar-Paulenz's programme of global religious history to examine non-European and non-modern knowledge orders to see if knowledge was or was not organised similarly. But even if there were only this single parallel, it can be compared with European classifications, and it can be asked under what conditions this form of conceptualisation occurred. Since factors other than colonial interests played a role in Mongolia, a comparison can provide new insights into the social conditions and genesis of interpretations of the social world associated with the word 'religion.' As a result, prevailing theories in religious studies that focus on the emergence and genealogy of the modern Western understanding of *religion* and its global impact would be expanded and modified.

Accordingly, a possible epistemological interest of a global history of religion would be to gain insight into how human knowledge systems are formed and organised, asking for the conditions under which similar classifications were developed or not in different cultures.

At the same time, research focusing on religion can help build religious studies theories that are not limited by concentrating on modern discourses about 'religion.'

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