



The Western Concept of Religion seen through Asian Alternatives: Remarks on the Epistemic Exercise of “Inversed Hermeneutics”

Jens Schlieter

Published on 29/01/2024

Abstract

In this contribution, I discuss under the heading “inversed hermeneutics” a process wherein the conceptual, classificatory terms of a foreign knowledge system are used to interpret one’s own concepts and their underlying assumptions. A key function of “inversed hermeneutics” is to induce a deliberate alienation and thus momentarily placing the cognizing subject into a liminal state of “unfamiliarity.” This method should help to introduce and probe new ways of classifying things.

1. The need for “inversed hermeneutics”


In the contribution presented in this special issue, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz demonstrates how the evolution of indigenous classificatory systems in Buddhist Central Asia allows us to assume that for Mongolians of the 17th century there was, indeed, an autonomous “religious” field. In this field, single traditions, worldviews, and practices could be identified, delineated, and addressed in Mongolian as *üjel* (translating the Tibetan *lta*), meaning a “view,” or as *nom* and *šasin* (both translating Tibetan *chos*, on its part translating both Sanskrit *dharma* and *sāsana*, see Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 16–21; 2013: 164–170).

Kollmar-Paulenz moves on to show how especially the concept of *šasin* has been successfully developed by Mongolian intellectuals over the last three centuries to identify indigenous epistemic equivalents of “religion(s),” allowing, for example for the “reification” of shaman teachings into “shamanism” (*böge-yin šasin*, see Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 28–29; 2013: 181). Furthermore, she makes important remarks on the potential of knowing “the influences of emic analytical concepts on the discourse field ‘religion’” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 31; 2013: 185) for the systematic study of religion.

First of all, scholars of religion working on religion at large, or on European traditions, should become aware of their own tendency to “de-individualize” and “de-historicize” Asian knowledge cultures (see Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 31; 2013: 185). Secondly, as Western, and non-Western scholars meet and collaborate in international academia, she expresses the strong hope that “non-European knowledge systems will influence our own conceptualizations over time”

Corresponding author: Jens Schlieter, University of Bern.

To quote this article: Schlieter, Jens. 2024. “The Western Concept of Religion seen through Asian Alternatives: Remarks on the Epistemic Exercise of ‘Inversed Hermeneutics.’” *ARGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 117–125. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2024.4762.

 Licence by [ARGOS](https://www.journal-argos.org) and the author. Visit <https://www.journal-argos.org>.

(Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 31; 2013: 185). This is an important hope that she shares with other scholars who not only want to study Asian traditions, but also advocate for the recognition of non-Western indigenous worldviews not only as mere objects of study, but as instruments that will help us understand our epistemic objects.

In her conclusion, Kollmar-Paulenz formulates a specific desideratum: Asian concepts should no longer be construed as “a-historical,” static, timeless views that lack the complexity of their respective Western counterparts (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 34–35; 2013: 190–191). Instead, they should be regarded as means to describe not only Asian but more general exempla of “religion(s).” This would allow calling into question the looming “cultural imperialism” of the West in an experimental fashion, for example, by *deliberately historicizing* certain Western concepts before employing them for the analysis of other cultures, as epitomized by the example of Kurtis Schaeffer’s “medieval” and “early modern” analysis of the Tibetan “medieval” and “early modern” culture of scholarship (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 35–36; 2013: 191; Schaeffer 2009).

The aims of contextualizing and historicizing the Western concept of religion are obvious. Many proponents of this move claim that the Western, post-Enlightenment use of the concept “religion” reproduces an exclusive approach to identifying “religion” and classifying “religions” that was largely unknown in non-Western contexts. Certainly, the concept of “religion” seems to have been one of the most prominent “conceptual exports” of the West. It has found entrance in many non-Western languages and is in use in almost all national constitutions. Furthermore, an innumerable number of documents name “religion” or “religions,” from passports and legal acts to vernacular literature, newspapers, and, not least, fiction.

Without question, the concept with all its specific “baggage” has shaped Western and non-Western life-worlds alike. Indeed, this fact is no longer controversial. But does this import show that non-Western societies lacked any equivalent for classifying “religion(s)”? Indeed, the question of knowing whether pre-modern Asian societies had brought forth classificatory systems able to address certain indigenous teachings, practices, or communities as “religious,” and to pit these as “religions” against each other, or against other systems in society (e.g., the state, art, or philosophy—to take some different classificatory examples), has found a less homogenous answer.

Still, most systematic contributions on equivalent non-Western ways of classifying “religion(s)” are interested in determining whether the Western term of “religion” is applicable to them or not. These inquiries delve into the existence of both the classificatory term (do they have one or many terms for “religion”?) and the classified units (does a term like Chinese *zongjiao* subsume in pre-modern times elements corresponding to our “religion(s)”?). For instance, the volume in which Kollmar-Paulenz’s contribution originally appeared (*Religion in Asien?*) intended to present *Studies on the Applicability of the Concept of Religion*.¹ The pragmatic solution provided by

¹ Ger.: *Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs* (see Kollmar-Paulenz 2013).

polythetic definitions of religion (a set of typical dimensions, in which each element is, however, optional) can also be regarded as an attempt to defend the Western concept of religion as *the* classificatory system against potential challenges coming from non-Western terms.

In a more radical fashion, some postcolonial scholars of religion actually argue that in India there was no “religion,” and that there were no “religions,” respectively, before European powers and their scholars started to impose their classificatory system. What can we then say about non-Western classifications? In contrast to these postcolonial views, Kollmar-Paulenz asks for these classificatory systems to be brought into the global discourse, and, more precisely, to be regarded as valid tools to analyze Western traditions *and* Western classificatory concepts. But who should do this? Interestingly, Richard King (see the quote below) does not specify that the introduction of “indigenous epistemic” perspectives on religion should be championed predominantly by Asian scholars in their own languages. On the contrary, it seems to me that his implicit division of labor primarily tasks Western scholars with this duty, beginning with his own introduction of Indian Buddhist categories and modes of thought as means to undo the “epistemic violence of the colonial encounter” (King 1999: 199; Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 32; 2013: 186).²

More often, however, scholars have asked questions such as, “What would mainstream Western discourse resemble if it had adapted, say, a moral concept of karma and rebirth, a non-speciesist succession of lives, Confucian ethics, or Daoist concepts of nature?” When looking at conceptual imports from Asia, we find, for example, “nirvana,” as an operational term. However, there is no trace of a term like “dharma” *in its classificatory sense*. A sentence like, “The dharma has come to the West,” usually signifies that Asian religious communities following Buddhist or Hindu traditions—or converts adhering to these traditions—are present in the West. Similarly, in publications on “dharmic” and “non-dharmic traditions,” the concept is usually confined to name the Indian context. Dharmic traditions, in this sense, encompass Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism (see, for instance, Nanda 2016), that is, traditions originating from Indian soil as opposed to Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and others. Dharmic and non-dharmic are also used to describe the Indian traditions that side for or against Vedic authority (*āstika/nāstika*; see Nicholson 2010: 168–170). Lastly, neo-Buddhist or neo-Hindu traditions, employ this distinction to contrast their own “dharmic” tradition with the “a-dharmic” others.

2. “Inversed hermeneutics”

The approach that Schaeffer advances in his book on “book culture” already presents some interesting heuristic aspects. However, for the remainder part of this contribution I would like to focus on a considerably more “experimental,” but, admittedly, also problematic enterprise. In her discussion of postcolonial approaches to the study of religion in Asia, Kollmar-Paulenz considers the following remark by Richard King:

² King mentions the famous Indologist Bimal Krishna Matilal. In the latter’s published work, however, I could not find an attempt to reframe Western classificatory schemes by introducing Indian concepts.

“ The introduction of a variety of indigenous epistemic traditions is [...] the single most important step that postcolonial studies can take if it is to look beyond the Eurocentric foundations of its theories and contest the epistemic violence of the colonial encounter. This challenge requires engagement with the knowledge-forms and histories of those cultures that have been colonized by the West [...]. (King 1999: 199)

Indeed, from this I conclude that one way to really engage with non-Western, indigenous concepts for “religion” and relevant cognates would be to begin with those concepts and explore what they may contribute to our understanding of past and present Western traditions—including of our past and present conceptual tools. I am uncertain whether such a form of hermeneutics of one’s own context and intellectual history has already found an elaborate theoretical expression in comparative disciplines beyond the systematic study of religion. Hence, I will tentatively call this approach, “inversed hermeneutics.” An exercise in “inversed hermeneutics” will consist of using indigenous classificatory concepts devised by the “remote” (often Asian) “other” as self-sufficient analytical tools to analyze one’s own tradition. This procedure will only yield results if the understanding of the “other” is secured, and a sufficient understanding of their emic concepts has been achieved. An indicator that these premises are met could be the ability of using an analytic concept in a context far removed from its original source while leaving it untranslated. The obvious fact that this procedure entails encountering various hermeneutic circles is not a major concern, as these are unavoidable anyway.

In its core, I define “inversed hermeneutics”³ as a process wherein the conceptual, classificatory terms of a foreign knowledge system are used to interpret one’s own concepts and their underlying framework and basic assumptions. As such, a key function of “inversed hermeneutics” is to induce a deliberate alienation and thus momentarily placing the cognizing subject—as far as possible—into a liminal state of “unfamiliarity.” This method aims to create a distance between one’s own conceptual convictions and their established use, in order to introduce a new way of classifying things. The first part of this process may enact this “unfamiliarity,” akin to Michel Foucault’s famous reference to José L. Borges’s fictional classification of a “certain Chinese dictionary”.⁴ However, the ultimate goal is to transcend this preliminary step and use these concepts as analytical tools.

³ The concept of “reverse hermeneutics” has been introduced in classical phenomenology as well as in post-structuralist literary criticism to designate the process of reading a text backwards, from its end to the beginning (e.g., Caputo 1986). As this is not what I have in mind, one could name this process and method “reversed hermeneutics.” However, this concept is also already in use, particularly within African Theology where it denotes the reading the Biblical text in light, for example, of the contemporary African lifeworld (Magezi/Igba 2018). Thus, it seems that “inversed hermeneutics” might be the most fitting name for my intended approach. Thanks to Bastiaan van Rijn for suggesting replacing “reversed” with “inversed.”

⁴ In this, Foucault (1970: xv) quotes, “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification,” and so forth.

How, then, should such a process, which bears certain elements of a simulative thought experiment (Koch 2003), look like?

Without question, scholars of Asian traditions engage with Western texts and offer their analysis, using emic terms in various modern vernacular languages. Their contributions, however, are rarely translated into Western languages and are exceedingly infrequently integrated into Western discourse. The reasons are obvious. Until recently, few Asian scholars had full access to Western libraries, and if so, they often wanted to become part of Western academia, lived in the West, and sought—or were induced to—comply with Western academic knowledge systems. The approach of “inversed hermeneutics” challenges the intellectual predominance of the “Western role model.” Such a change of perspective is still largely discouraged by Western academia. Indeed, a significant presence of translated Asian works analyzing Western taxonomies of religion would have made a difference in the intellectual trajectory of the West.

But if it is Western scholars of both Western *and* Eastern traditions who will, for the time being, assume the task of “inversed hermeneutics”, how could such an attempt look like regarding Asian classificatory concepts in the field of “religion(s)”?

One could, for example, start with the concepts of “*dharma*”/“*chos*” and see how the conceptual systems of “religion” and “religion(s)” would look like through such an analytical lens—and similarly for other Western terms for conceptualizing the religious field, such as the Latin terms *lex* (for example, *lex mosaica*), *secta*, *sectae*, and *fides*. But the moment one has taken the decision to start using “*dharma*” as the preferred tool for “inversed hermeneutics,” one encounters the first problem. Which concept of “*dharma*”? Given the dominant meanings of *dharma* which include such diverse referential objects as cosmic “truth,” (fundamental world-) “order,” universal “law,” “duty” and “norms” (of a caste), “virtuous behavior,” “teaching,” and, finally, “religion” or a (specific) “religious tradition,” one will quickly become aware that using the concept would just amount to picking a certain pre-selected meaning to attempt a specific and meaningful “inverse hermeneutics.”

Using the terms “*dharma*” or “*chos*” in an ahistorical way would, however, fall under Kollmar-Paulenz’s above-mentioned criticism (see also her recent discussion on the Tibetan concept *chos* as used in premodern Christian-Tibetan encounters in Tibet, Kollmar-Paulenz 2023). Furthermore, historicizing concepts should be a process relevant to both sides. Throughout the centuries, the Western concept of religion also served to designate a wide array of different referential objects. Many of these meanings are usually unknown and inaccessible, because even our “own tradition” possesses elements which are “alien” to us. In this way, using the neo-phenomenological terms and ideas of Bernhard Waldenfels (2011), one could consider “inversed

hermeneutics” as building on “intercultural alienness” to raise our awareness of “intracultural alienness.”⁵

The “inversed hermeneutics”-approach shares some aspects of James Spickard’s idea of “alternative sociologies” of religion (Spickard 2017). Spickard asks in his work:

“ If Euro-American sociology of religion developed its core concepts out of a particular culture and history, what happens if we set that history aside? What if sociology had arisen in another civilization, with a different religion and culture? (Spickard 2017: 15)

Along these lines, Spickard sketches a sociology of religion departing, for example, from Confucian notions of “ritual” (lǐ) and “virtue” (dè), or from ancestor worship. However, he does not use these tools to analyze Western conceptual schemes. Somewhat disappointingly, he does not historicize the West either. Instead, he draws on an abstract and more or less decontextualized “default view” of Western sociology of religion, with “church, belief, and morality as central to the religious enterprise” (Spickard 2017: 5). Given his interest in alternative forms of non-Western sociology, for example, of “Confucian sociology,” dealing on their part with non-Western religion, this is understandable, but sets his project on a different track.

Similarly, projects such as Wilhelm Halbfass’s attempt to clarify the hermeneutic preconditions of mutual understanding between India and Europe can be called more properly an exercise in “intercultural hermeneutics” (Halbfass 1988: 34, 160–170). Halbfass describes in a very illuminative way the modern hermeneutic situation of Indian scholars dealing with, for example, the Western concept of “philosophy” and asks about “the role of the *alien* concept [...] in modern Indian *self-understanding*” (1988: 292). Occasionally, however, he also points to the “hermeneutic interplay” of Eastern and Western concepts such as *darśana* / philosophy in works of scholars like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (Halbfass 1988: 300–303). Yet, Halbfass, writing in the 1980s, made clear that the time for Indian scholars to bring their categories into play with Western concepts had not yet come, since the whole setting of the dialogue was ruled by the laws of Western Eurocentric academia (Halbfass 1988: 372–375). The situation today is probably slightly better.

But how can we solve the need to historicize Asian concepts before using them as instruments to analyze Western knowledge systems? To me, the best possible way consists in embedding concepts in their original textual contexts. If one wants to employ them as analytical tools, they must be specific enough for this purpose. In particular they need to be defined in regard to a variety of indigenous reference traditions, a plurality of practices, of ethical dimensions, and so forth.

⁵ “Alien experience [...] reaches its high point as our experience itself becomes alien. [...] As interpersonal alienness begins from intrapersonal alienness, so too does *intercultural* alienness begin from *intracultural* alienness” (Waldenfels 2011: 77).

In her recent contribution, on the *Global History of Religion*, Kollmar-Paulenz (2023) touches upon exactly these questions. Following the approach of Margrit Pernau (2016), she argues that our final goal should be to integrate in our concepts the experiences condensed in indigenous taxonomies. On the one hand, this seems to a certain extent in line with the methodology of “inversed hermeneutics” that I am suggesting here. On the other hand, it preserves the idea of maintaining Western categories, although transformed and enriched:

“ Once these taxonomies are identified, the tedious and lengthy work of the third step begins, namely the transformation and reconfiguration of existing Eurocentric concepts through the integration of non-European experiences configured in their own taxonomies. (Kollmar-Paulenz 2023: 15)

To use Asian classificatory concepts as analytical tools in “inversed hermeneutics,” I would like to suggest starting with keeping to the terms in their original language.⁶

Terms analyzing indigenous religious fields are most likely to be found in scholarly works, which aim to review “religion(s)” from a certain external vantage point. Within global epistemic cultures, these works are often written by philosophically minded individuals, for example, the Indian and Tibetan authors who wrote comparative compendia of *darśana*-s, “philosophical-religious worldviews,” (see Schlieter 2021) or “presentation of tenets” (Tib. *grub mtha'i rnam bzhag*; see Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 10–11). In my view, one promising example of “inversed hermeneutics” could be to use the concept of *darśana*-s to analyze the history of the relationship between “philosophy” and “religion” in the West—hopefully, through the collaboration of Eastern and Western scholars within an emerging shared space of decolonized encounter.

Bibliography

- Caputo, John D. 1986. “Heidegger and Derrida: Cold Hermeneutics.” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 17 (3), 252–274.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm. 1988. *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- King, Richard. 1999. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East.”* London: Routledge.
- Koch, Anne. 2003. *Das Verstehen des Fremden. Eine Simulationstheorie im Anschluss an W.V.O. Quine*, Darmstadt: WBG.

⁶ This project should not be confused with essentialist attempts to position certain terms as “non-translatables” (which immediately becomes a paradoxical, if not a dogmatic, claim), or nationalist agendas to declare a certain language as “superior” (Malhotra/Babaji 2020).

- 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 et al. 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 17th to the 21st Century. A Contribution to the Debate on Non-European Concepts of Religion." *ARGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 6–47.
- Magezi, Christopher / Jacob T. Igba. 2018. "African Theology and African Christology: Difficulty and complexity in contemporary definitions and methodological frameworks," *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 74 (1), 4590.
- Malhotra, Rajiv / Satyanarayana Dasa Babaji. 2020. *Sanskrit Non-Translatables: The Importance of Sanskritizing English*. New Delhi: Manjul Publishing.
- Nanda, Ved P., ed. 2016. *Compassion in the 4 Dharmic Traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism*. New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan.
- Nicholson, Andrew J. 2010. *Unifying Hinduism. Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pernau, Margrit. 2016. "Provincializing Concepts: The Language of Transnational History," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36 (3), 483–499.
- Schaeffer, Kurtis R. 2009. *The Culture of the Book in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schlieter, Jens. 2021. "The Indian Origins of 'Comparative Religion'. Compendia of Religious-Philosophical Worldviews of 'Cosmovisions' (darśana-s)." In *Das alles hier*, ed. by Ulrike Niklas / Heinz W. Wessler / Peter Wyzlic / Stefan Zimmer. Heidelberg / Berlin: Cross Asia, 341–372.
- Spickard, James V. 2017. *Alternative Sociologies of Religion. Through Non-Western Eyes*. New York: New York University Press.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. 2011. *Phenomenology of the Alien. Basic Concepts* [Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden]. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

About the author

Jens Schlieter, PhD in Philosophy (1999), Habilitation in Science of Religion (2006), is professor and co-director of the Institute for Science of Religion, University of Berne (Switzerland). His work focuses on Indian Buddhism, theories of metaphor, language, and religion; near-death experiences and the discourse on religious experience.

Mail: jens.schlieter@unibe.ch