



Even When Historical Texts Are Not an Option: Extending Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's Approach to a Global History of Religion

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Published on 29/01/2024

Abstract

Seeking to extend Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's (2024) methodology for overcoming Eurocentric perspectives in the global history of religion, this commentary evaluates the challenges and alternatives for historiography when textual sources for religious practices are absent. Drawing on research into artistic, visual, and oral practices in Mongolia and the Himalayan region, the authors propose a critical reassessment of the foundational notions of globality, history, and religion.


In her plea to finally implement what thinkers of post-colonialism have been advocating for decades—namely “to de-Europeanise the theoretical perspectives on ‘religion’”—Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz suggests, in the contribution translated for this special issue, that

“ the concept of a “global history of religion” 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. Despite differences in content, these systems can be functionally and structurally analogous to one another, enabling comparative exploration. 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)

Through a detailed analysis of the discourse on the concept of “religion” as found in Mongolian and Tibetan texts spanning from the 17th to the 21st century, Kollmar-Paulenz demonstrates how such a non-Eurocentric approach can be successfully implemented. Drawing on these texts, she highlights statements that not only confirm the existence of such a discourse but also its culture-specific characteristics.

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To quote this article: Wettstein, Marion / Michaela Wisler. 2024. “Even When Historical Texts are Not an Option: Extending Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's Approach to a Global History of Religion.” *ARGOS* 3 (2) Special Issue *Towards a Global History of Religion*, 126–132. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2024.4763 .

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She suggests that

“ within this specific historical and local context, it is important to recognize that we are dealing with an understanding of religion that accentuates particular aspects, which often do not take precedence in our everyday understanding of religion and in the conceptual framework of the academic study of religion. “Religion” (*mörgöl*) refers here to the performance, the bodily enactment, of practices and rituals. However, to my knowledge, *mörgöl* is employed in the sources solely in direct reference to “shamanism” and—more rarely—to “Buddhism.” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 22)

Her textual analysis concludes that “Throughout the centuries, Tibetan intellectual elites have developed a nuanced terminology to name their own doctrine or teaching system, as well as to identify both intra-Buddhist adversaries and non-Buddhist teaching systems” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 24). However, “The carriers of these discourses, the local intellectuals, are all too often perceived [by “Western” observers] as representatives of a tradition that they merely substantiate and perpetuate, rather than as individual personalities” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 31).

Analysing discourses from a global history of religion perspective, particularly those outside the European or “Western” setting, necessitates a thorough understanding of local languages and cultural contexts. This is often presumed to enable translations that do justice to the original texts and concepts. Yet, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz also cautions elsewhere: “Translators do not just pick out equivalents between languages, they actively invent them, and thus contribute to the transformation of the languages they work with.” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2023: 11) While Kollmar-Paulenz’s primary sources are Tibetan and Mongolian texts, her insights extend beyond these specific contexts. She notes a consensus among scholars specialising in the global history of religion, predominantly within German-speaking religious studies, that “methodological procedure should be genealogical. This entails that the present categories we use in the analysis do not have stable meanings reaching back into history,” and it is required to employ a “careful study of the historical semantics of non-European analytical conceptualizations” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 7).

We suggest that such an approach to a global history of religion should also be attempted when historical texts are not an option as sources, as in cases of oral traditions, or when alternative types of sources provide more compelling evidence, which is often the case in visual, material, and performative artistic contexts. In the following, we will introduce two exemplary fields of research of this kind: one from the context of Mongolian art examined by Michaela Wisler, and another from the context of Himalayan oral traditions studied by Marion Wettstein. Given the scope of this commentary, these two cases cannot be explored in depth, but we hope they can serve to encourage fellow anthropologists of religion to join the debate about a global history of religion.

Through her research, Michaela Wisler aims to encourage scholars to focus on visual art as a lens for exploring a global history of religion, suggesting that the field would significantly benefit from

this approach. The entanglements between religion and art are complex and multilayered, and discussing their details is beyond the scope of this commentary. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that visual and material representations of religion are generally crucial in artistic contexts. As Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz notes, religion is a “key concept” and an “order of knowledge” which can manifest in various forms, including visual art. Mongolian art, especially the visual arts such as painting, drawing, or sculpting, is closely intertwined with the field of religion. The following examples will illustrate how these connections can be fruitfully examined as contributions to a global history of religion and how they can be employed to reflect on its approaches.

The Buddhist-dominated regions of Tibet and Mongolia have a long, vibrant, and entangled history of distinct religious art. Explicit religious expressions of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and deities in Thangkas and sculptures are numerous and exhibit many distinct styles. Historically, Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist art developed in a context of intense exchange among artists, sponsors, and religious institutions throughout Central Asia and other parts of the world. Such entanglements continue to be constitutive of the Buddhist religious art context today. Furthermore, Mongolia is engaged in the global art market, with traditional Buddhist Thangka painting remaining a vibrant component of both art and religious practice in the country (Uranchimeg 2019).

Academics, both Western and Mongolian, have extensively researched Mongolian religious paintings. However, the perspectives of such research are mainly confined to the domain of art history. From the standpoint of religious studies within the framework of global religious history, a crucial question arises: Would an interpretation of Mongolia’s religious history grounded in visual art sources necessitate a significant revision of current historiography?¹ How would this history differ from the findings Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz has derived from her textual sources? Could this approach potentially yield a novel understanding of Mongolian religion, or of the Mongolian “order of knowledge”?

One of the most famous and celebrated artists in Mongolian art history is Zanabazar (1635–1723), who continues to be a role model in Mongolian art to this day. He is often referred to as “da Vinci of Asia,” a label that problematically reflects the prevalence of Western-centric interpretations and definitions of art. Notwithstanding, Mongolian scholars, most notably Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem, have provided an art historical review and interpretation of Zanabazar’s oeuvre. Tsultem published five volumes on various artistic expressions: architecture (1988), Mongol Zurag (1986), arts and crafts (1987), Zanabazar (1982), and sculpture (1989). Through these works, he aimed not only to categorise the arts of his home country from a vernacular perspective but also to preserve Mongolia’s cultural heritage. During the socialist era (1924–1990), many artworks, particularly those with religious significance, were destroyed or removed. The purges were so

¹ Using the example of Zanabazar, Orna Tsultem demonstrated how textual and visual sources can differ, and how these differences lead to illuminating results regarding the historiography of religion (Uranchimeg 2015).

extensive that Mongolia lost a significant portion of its religious cultural heritage that Tsultem sought to help restore. While the implications of Tsultem's research for religious studies are yet to be fully discussed, his work provides a salient example for Kollmar-Paulenz's critical approach. She maintains that discourses on art and religion should extend beyond Western intellectual thought and become part of a global history of religion.

Also in present-day Mongolia, artists and intellectuals actively discuss their art history and their religion. Contemporary art is now globally entangled, fostering a lively exchange among different cultural traditions worldwide. While Mongolia participates in these exchanges, certain styles of art are locally perceived as distinctly Mongolian, particularly the "Mongol Zurag" style.² This style depicts scenes from everyday life, including religion, and is strongly promoted and widely taught in Mongolian art education. The motifs of this style are mostly historical, portraying the glorious past of the Mongol Empire, which aligns well with the political and social agenda of the Mongolian establishment. In this manner, history is not only rewritten but also repainted. The emphasis on the past over the present in current Mongolian society is also reflected in contemporary art.³ In this context, religion is often seen as a crucial part of Mongolian culture, a "natural" component of the country and its people.

While art schools in Mongolia focus on teaching Mongol Zurag, traditional Buddhist Thangka painting, which had disappeared for decades due to socialist repression, is now being revived. New Thangka painting schools accept students from all backgrounds, including women, who were previously excluded. Many contemporary artists study Thangka painting techniques not for religious reasons but to honor the traditional cultural heritage. This reflects a "multiperspectivity" in the Mongolian approach to art and religion. Since the early 20th century, religious motives, their usage, and the discourse around religion and art have been highly diverse in Mongolia. Furthermore, this approach is quite different from European art discourse and practice. In Mongolia, multiple perspectives on how to use religious motifs in art are valid, and it is considered self-evident that painters may have different religious stances and identifications. Conversely, in European art discourse and practice, religion is often a highly controversial and provocative topic. This example illustrates how a global history of religion, when it expands beyond textual sources to incorporate non-Western approaches, can benefit significantly from a focus on artistic expression. For anthropologists of religion, one of the challenges is the fact that historical sources approved by historians—typically written sources or at least datable artwork, as discussed above—are lacking in many parts of the world. Assessing local discourses on "religion" that provide historical depth extending before the era of colonial intervention is particularly challenging in cases of small local societies that traditionally do not employ writing and that were

² This style originated in the 1920s with Baldugiin Sharav's prominent painting "One Day in Mongolia" and served as a counterpoint to socialist realism, the dominant artistic style at that time.

³ It is important to note that not all contemporary art follows this trend. There are numerous new and state-independent projects that diverge from this political and historical agenda, aiming to introduce new themes and techniques to the Mongolian art scene.

not deemed significant enough to be described or even mentioned by surrounding written traditions. And when these societies are mentioned, as Kollmar-Paulenz aptly notes, the accounts are likely to be biased and generalised.

A history of religion can truly be deemed “global” only if it succeeds in including the perspectives and views of all local traditions, practices, and groupings, not just those based on writing. These may also encompass artistic expressions, as discussed above, or oral accounts. Thus, for a project aiming at a comprehensive global history of religion that includes such societies, there needs to be a conceptual and methodological reframing, not only of the approach to “religion” but also to “history.”

Societies without written traditions, for instance, are found in great numbers in the extended Himalayas. The first generation of anthropologists permitted to travel to Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s encountered many small local societies that, while practicing their own religious traditions and rituals independent from Buddhism or Hinduism, had never used writing. Many of them also lacked traditions of painting or sculpture and were not deemed significant enough by neighbouring Tibetan or Sanskritic traditions to be described in detail. In anthropological literature, these local traditions are often subsumed under the now contested umbrella term “shamanism,” for lack of a more suitable concept. In these societies, ritual recitations were memorised by heart by local specialists. Religious worldviews or relations to neighbouring traditions were preserved—sometimes explicitly, sometimes subtly, or “between the chants”—in what is commonly called “mythology.”

In only exceptional cases have researchers encountered script traditions in Himalayan shamanic societies that predate colonial intervention. One such case, studied by Toni Huber (2020), allowed him to trace the development of religious traditions and concepts over approximately 1000 years. However, this is a rare example in the Himalayas, where the influence of neighbouring written traditions—Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, in this case—led to an early adoption of script.

Retracing the history of societies without script, and often without a tradition of painting, necessitates including a broad range of data and methodological approaches. These are often dismissed as ineligible sources by historians (of religion): mythological narratives and “folklore,” ritual practices, or everyday material culture. Such data is predominantly collected by ethnographers through in-depth and long-term field research. Certainly, one of the most challenging aspects of the ethnographic approach to historical retracing is the question of dating events or discourses. To illustrate this problem, consider the following anecdote from the field.

Together with her partner Alban von Stockhausen, Marion Wettstein conducted field research among the Dumri Rai of Eastern Nepal. In the early 2000s, von Stockhausen learned about a renowned *nakcho* (local ritual specialist or “shaman”) who had recently passed away, precluding any possibility of meeting him. The *nakcho*’s fame extended far beyond the Dumri Rai community; he had even been invited by the King of Nepal. The king’s daughter was very ill, and no one could heal her—not the Brahmins, *sadhus*, or astrologers. After healers from all over Nepal had failed,

the Dumi Rai *nakcho* succeeded. To express his gratitude, the king offered the *nakcho* a choice of any item from the palace treasury. Despite the array of precious golden artifacts, the *nakcho* was most interested in a large buffalo horn, which he chose as his reward. The horn is still with his family, and Alban von Stockhausen was even given the opportunity to try playing it. Some time after returning from the field research, von Stockhausen attended a lecture by Michael Oppitz about the mythology of the Naxi (also known as Nakhi) in China's Sichuan province. Intriguingly, one of the myths he heard there was nearly identical to the one described above. However, this version was set several hundred years earlier in the royal Chinese court, with a Naxi *dongba* (also known as *tomba/dtomba*) priest in the main role.

This anecdote exemplifies that time in “shamanistic” Himalayan societies is often perceived non-chronologically and non-linearly. Mythology from the past and events of the recent past sometimes overlap during current recitations or narrations. However, this does not imply that such societies lack an understanding of time or history—or, within the context of this discussion, a history of religion. Nor does it indicate a weakness in the ethnographic method. Rather, it reveals that the Western academic concept of “history” struggles to encompass such nonlinear approaches to time. If history aims to be truly global—and thus necessarily includes societies globally on an equal footing—this limitation in the academic concept of history must be addressed and overcome.

The two fields of research exemplified in this commentary suggest that addressing these challenges requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates a multitude of facets. This necessitates a comprehensive debate on all three key concepts: the “global” aspect, the understanding of “history,” and the interpretation of “religion.” Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz has made a significant contribution to this endeavour. However, many more steps must be taken by the academic community if the project of a global history of religion is to be realised successfully.

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Dr. **Marion Wettstein** is an anthropologist and scholar of religious studies specialising in the extended eastern Himalayan region. Having primarily conducted empirical field research among communities in Northeast India and Nepal which previously lacked writing systems, her research interests include visual anthropology, ritual and performance studies, anthropology of religion, material culture, mythology, and gender studies.

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