



# Religion and Folklore: Conceptual Comparisons and Current Developments

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## Abstract

The article reflects on religion both as a concept and as a field of studies from a transcultural perspective, linking it to current developments in folkloristics. It sheds light on the methodology of vernacular religion, a concept introduced by Leonard N. Primiano in the 1990s, which gained momentum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with attention shifting from the institutional and scriptural forms of religions to vernacular beliefs, narratives, and practices in daily life.

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The article by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Lamas and Shamans,” initially published in German in 2013, is a contribution towards liberating scholarship on religion from its conceptual confines within the disciplinary discourse forged in Europe. We are bound by the dominant vocabulary, the power of words that frame and limit the field of studies and direct our perspectives. Critical reflexivity on the formation of theories and a sensitive examination of the abstractions formed by the Western tradition are essential, although they are unlikely to break up the enclosure of our field of vision, confined by the concepts with which we think. Kollmar-Paulenz demonstrates that the term religion, often perceived as a Western invention, finds a parallel in Mongolia, having been conceived and evolved independently from European thought. The abstract terms *nom* and *šasin* appear in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Buddhist sources to signify dharma and Buddhist teachings, and their related rules and scriptures. Over time, these concepts were developed and processed in Mongolia, in the confrontation between Buddhism and indigenous religious practices, which were labelled as “false views” or, later, as the teachings of the shamans. The Western counterpart to these so-called false views is strikingly similar—superstition and idolatry, i.e. beliefs and practices that either opposed Christianity or appeared as remnants of a pagan era, becoming harmful or irrelevant to clerical doctrine. From a different angle, the religious conflict in Mongolia can be characterised as the confrontation between Buddhist writing and shamanic orality. The written word, bolstered by Tibetan scriptural authority, overcame, and replaced the dubious and weaker orality, the uttered word, which, in its endless variation, sounds unruly and undisciplined. In order to confront local traditions in Mongolia, lamas had to construct the image of an enemy: shamanism, which had not existed as a unified religion until Buddhism gave it definition.

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The concept of “religion” carries a strong connotation of institutional power and authority. It has often been distinguished from some related beliefs and practices, considered as problematic or erroneous, such as magic, witchcraft, fortune telling, astrology, necromancy, or other practices not controlled by the church. Now, religion itself has become a challenged, culturally misconstructed, and colonial concept (see, for example Forum 2017). It is reasonable to ask what might replace it, or what could be an appropriate key to understanding human and cultural phenomena “deemed as religious” (Taves 2009). Should we instead proceed from the notion of discourse, cultural practice, worldview, cognitive modelling? What other perspectives might we consider? Kollmar-Paulenz’s article is a strong argument for preserving “religion” as a valid transcultural concept. We can hardly avoid our intellectual roots in Western scholarship, and that’s acceptable as long as we maintain a self-critical and reflexive sensitivity towards our conceptual apparatus. There is room and potential for new and re-evaluated approaches rooted in non-Western patterns of thought. Like any living tradition, Western thinking is not isolated or bound to itself. It is likely that new perspectives arise at the intersections of autonomous disciplines and culturally liminal areas, as well as among scholars who are skilled in diverse traditions, both academic and non-academic.

More problematic than the concept of religion appears to be what lies outside its semantic core, i.e., the “superstitious” and folkish residues that the term inevitably evokes by implying or suggesting institutional structures. As Kollmar-Paulenz illustrates, in Mongolian academic traditions the term shamanism has its origins in Buddhist discourse. It has become an umbrella term encompassing various local beliefs and practices, such as the cult of the hearth divinity, the cult of the “White Old Man,” and the worship of mountains and water bodies (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 28–29; 2013: 181).

Buddhism’s encounter with Mongolian indigenous traditions created a hierarchical dichotomy and distinction, which in many cultures has been outlined as a two-tiered model: the co-existence of high religion and folk religion. In Europe, high religion was the domain of theologians and scholars of religion, while folk religion was entrusted to folklorists for documentation and research. Folk beliefs provided a solid, substantial, and inexhaustible body of material, underpinning both the development and credibility of academic folklore studies. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, folklore studies developed hand in hand with the study of religion. The Grimm brothers identified ancient Indo-European deities that appeared as “belittled” figures in folklore, remnants of pre-Christian Teutonic “low mythology.” Edward B. Tylor developed his notion of animism as the foundational form of religion, and James G. Frazer identified survivals of ancient beliefs and rituals among “civilised” societies. These and other scholars have contributed to both the establishment of folklore studies and religious studies, and they solidified the binary and hierarchically constructed distinction between religion and folk belief.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest in fieldwork grew among folklorists, which led the discipline away from retrospective speculations to the study of contemporary, living traditions within social contexts. Yet, the problematic opposition between clerical vs. folk, institutional vs. non-

institutional, and literary vs. oral persisted until recent times. How should we categorise practices like the magical application of the Lord's prayer in healing, the utilitarian use of the consecrated hosts as magical crop enhancers, or the manipulation with the Lutheran hymnal during night-time divinations in a bathhouse? Do these phenomena signify religion, folk belief, a blend of the two, or something else? Christianity, both in Europe and globally, is interwoven with such local beliefs and practices. Though they might seem misaligned from a clerical perspective, they epitomise the same Christian culture, shaped by mutual values, beliefs, and traditions.

Leonard Norman Primiano (1957–2021) was the pioneering folklorist who effectively questioned the two-tiered binary model of high and low religion that separated clerical orthodoxy from folk belief. He coined the term vernacular religion and stressed the significance of ethnographic methodology, defining it as the study of religion “as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 2022: 6). Primiano began developing the vernacular approach in the mid-1980s while he was a graduate student under Don Yoder in the University of Pennsylvania's folklore program. The concept first appeared in Primiano's article “Feminist Christian Songs: Occasions of Vernacular Religious Belief” (1985) and was further elaborated in his dissertation, “Intrinsically Catholic: Vernacular Religion and Philadelphia's ‘Dignity’” (1993). Primiano's seminal article “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife” was published in 1995. The new approach, offered as an alternative to studying “popular” or “folk” religion, preceded the rise of “lived religion” research and has since become well established in folkloristic scholarship and beyond (see Illman, Czimbalmos 2020; Bowman 2022). As Primiano emphasised, vernacular religion “is not the dichotomous or dialectical partner of ‘institutional’ religious forms” (2012: 384). It does not replace older concepts, like folk religion, but signals a shift in the study of religion “with the people becoming the focus of study and not ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ as abstractions” (Primiano 2012: 384).

Epistemological models that differentiate between two binary concepts, such as low and high, literary, and oral, or great and little, inherently prescribe binary focuses and divisions of empirical material. The vernacular religion approach has enabled folklorists to centre their research on areas previously situated in the liminal space between the two poles of the conventional conceptual scale defined by “folk” and “official” religion. Since concepts direct our perspectives and design mental maps of research, modified and new categories allow us to see data in new constellations, and discern the connections between phenomena and expressive forms that have been segregated by former classification schemes. Recently, the term belief narrative has emerged in folkloristics as an integrative genre label that has brought attention to the role of folklore in the formation of beliefs, attitudes, and values. It has brought together narratives of supernatural encounters, such as legends and memorates, and other stories that convey, solidify, challenge, or debunk beliefs without a supernatural implication. These narratives might concern topics like health, political convictions, conspiracies, climate change, or something else (Valk 2021). Eviatar Shulman has applied the “belief narrative” concept beneficially in Buddhist studies, when analysing discourses linked to the Buddha in the Pāli canon. As he writes, “Folklore and

religion are related to each other so intensely that they constitute continuous and, in many ways, overlapping realms of human action and experience” (2021: 187).

Another folkloristic attempt to dissolve conceptual dichotomies and perceive dialectical counterparts as intrinsically intertwined pertains to the age-old pairing of knowledge and belief. Anthropological discourse often dismissed belief as an analytical category due to definitional challenges and its perceived inferiority when juxtaposed with knowledge (Needham 1972). However, Jason N. Blum recently scrutinised the critique of belief in the study of religion. While he acknowledged many criticisms as valid, he considers “belief” a sensible and even inevitable concept in the study of religion given its pivotal role in human existence (Blum 2018). Folklorists have appreciated “belief” both abstractly and as a genre category, when referencing its casually formulated manifestations. Attitudes toward beliefs have gradually changed from negative to neutral, coinciding with the waning influence of cultural evolutionary thought and the historical disparagement of belief as irrational. Viewing belief as a fundamental form of cognition, inseparable from knowledge, has birthed the new conceptual framework of “vernacular knowledge.” This idea extends from “vernacular religion” but broadens the religious connotations of belief to its secular manifestations, influencing our grasp of reality (Valk 2022: 8). Consequently, knowledge does not contradict belief; it leans on belief as an essential comprehension tool.

The theoretical and methodological shifts in folkloristics, as a discipline closely related to the study of religion, illustrate the need to resist the solidification of concepts, which can occur due to the authority of an academic tradition. As the article by Kollmar-Paulenz demonstrates, useful concepts are always in the making and inherently possess both inclusive and exclusive qualities. While they establish epistemological boundaries, they also delineate conceptual counterparts, such as the relationship between religion and folklore. While religion is deeply entwined with its institutional implications, folklore remains non-institutional. However, folklore has been utilised for ideological and political purposes, such as laying the groundwork for national cultures in instances of weak or absent literary traditions (Ó Giolláin 2014). Folklore might draw from authoritative, institutionally anchored discourses and practices, often by challenging them, but as a dynamic cultural phenomenon, it generally evades institutionalisation. Hence, the folkloristic approach can be applied to religious phenomena on the fringes of institutionalised traditions, edges that are quickly expanding today in the context of the growth of beliefs and practices under the conceptual umbrella of New Age or New Spirituality.

Given that folkloristics and the study of religion emerged from the same academic traditions and even boast some shared foundational figures, it is unsurprising that there is a parallel in how they position and perceive their primary subjects: folklore and religion. Historically, scholars sought the origins of both within the “childhood” of humanity, and neither seemed destined for endurance in the rational, secular, and “disenchanted” world of modernity. Yet, contemporary understanding proves that prediction inaccurate, invigorating both academic fields, widening their scopes, and drawing scholars to investigate religion, folklore, and their entanglements in

today's living cultures. A significant portion of this research targets the non-institutional and non-scriptural facets of religious traditions, with insights stemming from various angles, including the folkloristics of religion. As empirical research and theoretical thought go hand in hand, religion, and folklore—as the basic categories of these related disciplines—have been conceptualised in tandem. Admittedly, distinctions exist in the semantic breadth of religion and folklore. Yet, both can today be understood and studied as creative practices anchored in tradition. Both exist not only as transcultural theoretical constructs, but also as cultural manifestations—even if the cultures in question might lack a systematic lexicon for analytical introspection. Kollmar-Paulenz provides compelling evidence of “religion” as a category sprouting and evolving in diverse cultural and historical settings. This insight resonates with folkloristics, which has been struggling with its colonial history and the hegemonic uses of folklore as a term (Naithani 2010; Briggs/Naithani 2012). Within European tradition, the term folklore was coined as late as 1846. However, this surely isn't the first emergence of folkloristic thinking and folkloristic discourse in the world culture. We can find traces of such thought in countries with ancient literary and philological traditions, like India and China. In Indian tradition, the age-old typological binary of “classical” versus “folk” is evident in the conceptual divide between two styles: *mārga* (highway) and *deśī* (byway) (Korom 2006: 13–14; Korom 2023). In South Indian, Dravidian poetic traditions we find the categories of *puṛam* (“exterior,” public) and *akam* (“interior,” domestic) styles of oral storytelling (Ramanujan 1999). Ancient China reflects a “strong, reiterated pattern of dialectical entanglement between writing and oral literature” (Liu 2012: 191). Such discussions and conceptual distinctions, remarkably, resonate with current folkloristic debates.

One of the lessons of Kollmar-Paulenz's article for folklorists is the need for a more nuanced exploration of the emergence of folkloristic ideation, and even the concept folklore itself, across diverse cultures. As we can find independent emergences of folkloristic thought in multiple cultures, perhaps it is not always fitting to follow the standard narrative of chronicling the history of folkloristics in Asia and worldwide with a (post)colonial perspective, commencing with the discussion of European influences from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (see for example Naithani 2012; Mori 2012). The time is ripe to re-evaluate the conceptual histories of both religion and folklore on a global scale. Both categories can be used without the post-colonial unease that arises from always accusing ourselves of Western cultural imperialism.

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