“Religion”: Just Another Modern Western Construction?

By Martin Riesebrodt

When the concept of religion is debated, the arguments usually represent more than a purely scholarly attempt to accurately define an object of study. As a term that has been primarily but not exclusively formed and rationalized in the modern West, debates about religion have routinely given rise to fundamental debates on the nature of Western modernity. One can claim without much exaggeration that the most central questions of Western modernity have been debated with reference to ‘religion,’ be they questions of metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, or anthropology.

Depending on how religion has been understood it represents an indispensable element in the construction of the social, an *a priori* given faculty of the human, or the foundation of morality and ethics; alternately, it represents a symptom of alienation, a survival from a prescientific era, an ideology serving worldly interests, an infantile illusion, or a romantic escapism. One can define “religion” so generally that everybody has to be “religious” somehow, or so specifically that no one “really” can be religious. Depending on one’s understanding, religion is a phenomenon disappearing in the process of secularization or one that is changing its form but which by definition cannot disappear. Any definition of religion is therefore in danger of achieving little more than the linguistic veiling of the prejudice or wishful thinking of the author.

Given such difficulties it is not surprising that the concept of religion itself has come under criticism. For example, anthropologist Talal Asad has argued that all attempts at a universal definition of religion are doomed to fail because religion as a concept is itself the product of a specifically Western modern discourse.[1] He claims that such universalistic claims are naïve because they fail to understand that definitions of religion are part of a political struggle designed to impose certain categories of thought and power relations on a given society.

This fundamental critique of “religion” has caused some productive irritation, especially in disciplines based on this concept. Often scholars of religion have employed rather diverse concepts of religion without reflecting sufficiently on their implications and the legitimacy of their universal application. Challenged by Asad, they now have to face the problem: what is the object of study for the sociology of religion or the history of religions if

[1] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

“religion” cannot be used universally, or when the term refers to endlessly changing phenomena?

In my view we have two options. Either we give up the concept and replace it with better concepts, or we find a justification for the concept which addresses the concerns of the critics without drawing their conclusions. The first option has been tried, but the more “neutral” concepts like “ideology,” “culture,” “knowledge,” or “discourse” fail to capture differences and complexities the concept of “religion” is able to address. This may also explain why some critics who maintain that the concept of religion should be given up still use it in their book titles. Asad even compares Medieval Christianity and Islam, obviously assuming that the two have something in common, but unwilling or unable to define what it is. If even the critics cannot come up with a more convincing alternative, then it makes sense to pursue the other option of thinking about a better justification of the concept of religion.

In order to do so I propose to counter the discursive deconstruction of religion as a universal concept with its “referential” legitimation. What do I mean by this phrase? I suggest that actors and institutions usually referred to as “religious” by academic disciplines actually tend to recognize each other and are recognized by third parties as being similar across historical and cultural boundaries, and express this perceived similarity in the ways they relate to each other. Expressions of such similarities can be found in matter-of-fact comparisons or in polemics. They can take the forms of competition, borrowings, identifications, and syncretisms. Outside observers such as travelers and political actors also normally understand competing religious practices and organizations as belonging to the same class of social phenomena.

Instead of focusing on the categories actors and institutions employ, I emphasize the presuppositions on which their mutual references rest. In other words, even if no single concept exists which could be translated as “religion,” “religious” actors and institutions recognize each other as similar. They mutually constitute, define, and transform each other; they compete with each other, polemicize against each other, and borrow from each other. In short: the systems of reference, in which religions emerge and interact with each other, resemble each other, a fact we witness throughout history and across cultures.

In this essay I will analyze such mutual references of religious actors in terms of polemics and dissociations as well as borrowings, syncretisms, and identifications. I will also look at edicts of emperors, which regulate, compare, and rank religious institutions. Given the limited space I will omit travel reports. My goal here is to legitimate the use of the analytical concept of religion universally, not to “find” an *a priori* universal concept of religion. Even

the Western discourse on religion, with its unique rationalization and systematization of the concept of religion over several centuries, did not end up with one concept, but with dozens of definitions. Because critics have claimed that religion is a modern western concept, I will choose examples primarily from pre-modern and non-western societies.

In this essay I propose a perspectivistic approach that deviates from a discursive approach in several aspects. Most important, whereas discursive approaches usually ascribe a hegemonic status to linguistic constructions of religion, perspectivistic theories begin with the assumption of a plurality of voices and forms of expression. Instead of a hegemonic discourse, I anticipate a multivocal "religious constellation": a plurality of perspectives on "religion" conditioned by typical locations in a social structure. These different social locations and the kinds of typical uncertainties related to them shape different kinds of religious needs, plausibility structures, and theodicies, which often may be enacted rather than clearly articulated. This then becomes the foundation of a rather broad and diffuse notion of "religion" that refers to religious institutions, actors, and practices in their complexity, and different groups emphasize those aspects which are most relevant to their social location. For example, intellectuals might emphasize religion as cosmology, ethics, or doctrine. Practitioners are most concerned with proper worship or the manipulation of superhuman powers. And emperors and bureaucrats might be mostly interested in the effects of religions on the legitimation of authority and social stability. But at the same time, each group would still recognize each other's perspectives as belonging to the same class of phenomena.

The following illustrations are meant to support my justification of the concept of religion by presenting different forms of such references. I show how religious actors and institutions have related to each other as similar in kind though different in value; or how religions have claimed to be identical with other religions; or how emperors have regulated diverse religious bodies in the same edict. As we will see, "religions" shaped each other centuries or even millennia before "The Modern West" supposedly invented, constructed, or even manufactured everything under the sun.

Polemics, Demarcation, Competition

The art of polemics is an ancient form of mutual recognition between religions, in which each perceives the other as opponent, competitor, or threat. Religious polemics represent a conflictual relationship while simultaneously expressing underlying commonalities without which the conflict would not have arisen. As a literary genre, polemics seems to be a specialty

of intellectuals, although through preaching and agitation it can "capture the masses" and escalate into violence and persecution.

Any religion needs contrast and difference in order to fully perceive and represent itself in a systematic fashion. Accordingly, all newly emerging or expanding religions take recourse to polemics or become the objects of polemics. Religious polemics are directed not only against external difference, but also, and probably more, often against internal deviance. Although apparently directed against the other religion, polemics increase the internal pressure to conform. From the following examples it will become clear that the dramatization of boundaries between religions is deemed necessary precisely because the "believers" have ignored them in their practices. Most often it is the religious functionaries and intellectuals who are concerned with the purity of religious doctrines and practices, whereas the masses of adherents at times don't care much about such boundaries and pragmatically participate in a variety of cultic practices under the motto: "it can't hurt." At the same time, it is this polemical distancing and its rationalizing impulse, which transforms a much more vague assembly of ideas and practices into "Judaism," "Christianity," "Islam," "Buddhism," "Hinduism," or "Shinto."

Judaism - Christianity - Islam

According to biblical sources ancient Judaism constituted itself in relation and distinction to other religious practices. References to other gods and forms of worship are numerous. The invisible god of the Hebrew Bible is compared to gods of other tribes, his power with their power, the forms of worshipping him to the forms of worshipping them. One of the decisive experiences was of course the exodus from Egypt; later it is the distancing from the cults of Canaan. The first commandment demarcated the worship of the Jewish god as the only legitimate one and threatens with sanctions whoever worships other gods or even imitates their forms of worship.

> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God … (Exod 20:2-5)

Not only is the worship of other gods prohibited, but the promise of the land is based on the rejection or even destruction of other cults (Exod 23:23-24; Deut 7:5). Other passages offer variations on the same theme. Obviously, Judaism emerges and defines itself in distinction to and in competition with other religions.

The same holds true for early Christianity. As a Jewish sect it first polemicizes against the mainstream Judaism of its times. Many verses in Matthew begin with formulae like "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Matt 23). With the expansion of Christianity into the world of Hellenism the pagans became another negative reference group (Acts 14; 17:16-34; 19: 21-40), especially in the letters of Paul. He admonishes the new converts to avoid idol worship and sacrificial meat (Rom 2:12-16; 1 Cor 8; 1 Cor 10:14-22; Gal 4:8-20). He also warns of imminent sanctions:

> Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. … Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply simply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake in the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or, are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor 10, 14-22).

Like Judaism and Christianity, early Islam also emerges through contrast and distinction to other religions. For Islam, the points of comparison are Judaism and Christianity as "religions of the book" on the one hand, and polytheism or "idolatry" on the other, the former representing the higher form of religion, the latter the lower one. Islam represents the highest form of the religions of the book (Sura 4), restoring their original message and closing the line of the prophets.

With regard to polytheism and idolatry Islam continues the polemics of Judaism and Christianity, although it is now concretely directed against the local cult of Mecca. Obviously, Islamic authorities are not only concerned about other groups worshipping other gods, but about their own Muslims relapsing into the worship of "idols." The sura called "The Unbelievers" is still written from the perspective of difference but tolerance between Islam and polytheism:

> Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine. (Sura 109)

But when the relapse of Muslims into idolatry is at stake drastic sanctions are to be expected:

> God will not forgive those who serve other gods besides Him; but He will forgive whom He will for other sins. He that serves other gods besides God is guilty of a heinous sin. (Sura 4:48)

Finally, in Sura 98 the opposition between Islam and others religions becomes even more radically accentuated:

> The unbelievers among the People of the Book and the pagans did not desist from unbelief until the Proof was given them: an apostle from God reciting from purified pages infallible decrees. … The unbelievers among the People of the Book and the pagans shall burn for ever in the fire of Hell. They are the vilest of all creatures.

The referential concept of religion is also clearly expressed in the "Book of Religion and Empire" attributed to Ali Tabari (died 855 C.E.). In the last chapters he asks the following hypothetical question.

> What would you say of a man coming to this country from the regions of India and China, with the intention of being rightly guided, of inquiring into the religions found in it, and of acquainting himself with the customs of its inhabitants? It will be said to him that some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called *Magianism*. … Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called *Zindikism*. … Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called *Christianism*. … Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called *Judaism*. … Some of its inhabitants belong to this pure and sublime religion called *Islam*.[2]

What is significant here is, of course, not that someone translated an Arab term like *din* as "religion." What alone is interesting is the fact how Ali Tabari classifies and compares phenomena. Although he values them differently, his presentation is obviously compatible with a concept like religion.

These examples from some key texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam prove that all three Abrahamic religions constitute themselves in distinction to other religious practices and beliefs, a trend that continues throughout history. Now the question arises whether or not this referential concept of religion can solely be found among the Abrahamic religions. Therefore we now turn to Asian religions, in particular Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto.

Asian Religions

Buddhism emerged as a movement of wandering ascetics, who distinguished themselves from Brahmanism on the one hand and from other ascetic movements on the other. The future Buddha, like other *samanas*, first turned to extreme asceticism, but found enlightenment only after having found the "middle path," which he explained as follows:

> These two (dead) ends, monks, should not be followed by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is, among sense-pleasures, addiction to attractive sense-pleasures, low, of the villager, of the average man, unariyan, not connected with the goal, and that which is addiction to self-torment, ill, unariyan, not connected to the goal. Now, monks, without adopting either of these (dead) ends, there is a middle course, fully to be the Truthfinder, making for vision, making for knowledge, which conduces to calming, to super-knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.[3]

Another polemic, the Brahmajala Sutta, aims at the false theories and practices of recluses and Brahmans. Some are criticized for making money through palm reading, telling the future or interpreting dreams, instead of living solely of alms. Others are chided for sleeping in luxurious beds, playing games, and appreciating entertainment. Moreover, they live in error

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[2] 'Ali Tabari, *The Book of Religion and Empire*, trans. A. Mingana (Lahore: Law Publishing Company, 1970).

[3] I. B. Horner, ed., *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)*, vol. IV (Mahavagga) (London: Luzac & Company, 1951).

and contradiction. Some Brahmans believe that the world and the soul are eternal and claim to remember details of former existences on this basis. They also engage in senseless speculations, for example about the extension of the world. There are also the "eel-wigglers," recluses who cannot decide what they believe; who according to the Buddha believe everything and its opposite.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than the one between the principles of Indian Buddhism and of Confucian China, between the ideals of Buddhist monasticism and Confucian bureaucracy. Where the ideal of Buddhism implies homelessness, which means that you are leaving your family behind, the highest value and norm of Confucian culture is filial piety and the religious veneration of ancestors, both of which are practices bound to a place. Whereas Confucian ideals are fundamentally life affirming and proclaim a strong belief in the possibility of perfecting humans as well as the social order, monastic Buddhism rejects the world as an illusion and believes in salvation through escape from the world and detachment from life. Whereas the emperor in Chinese culture represents the over-father who alone may sacrifice to the Lord of Heaven and in turn is worshipped by his subjects as the Son of Heaven, monastic Buddhism often despises kings and refuses to bow before them.

For all these reasons Buddhism in China encountered an ongoing polemic, which was not based on petty competition or doctrinal squabbles, but rather on profound differences in values. Simultaneously, the attempt of Buddhism to counter these allegations contributed to a transformation and sinicization of Buddhism as well as a partial fusion of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

In the *T'ai-p'ing-ching*, a tract from the late Han dynasty, Buddhism is accused of undermining filial piety and devotion to the ancestors. This lack of piety is expressed in the ideals of homelessness and celibacy. The Buddhists not only rejected this polemic, but countered it. They presented sutras which emphasized filial piety and forged other texts for further proof. Many of their stories about filial piety actually became extremely popular and reconciled Buddhism with Confucian values. But the Buddhists went even further by claiming that their understanding of filial piety was superior to the Confucian one, because by aiming at universal salvation all ancestors would be honored, not just one's own. And could there be any greater expression of filial piety than bringing salvation to your parent through conversion to Buddhism?

According to the mythical history, Buddhism found its way into Japan through a gift by the emperor of Pèkché to the Japanese emperor Kimmei. The gift consisted of a statue of the Buddha made from copper and gold accompanied by some incomprehensible sutras. The

emperor and important factions of his court were delighted and wanted to introduce Buddhism. But there were also voices that warned against the ire of the *kami*, the traditional superhuman powers: ancestors, heroes, and gods. Emperor Kimmei proposed an experiment. The statue of the Buddha was given for worship to the Soga clan, the strongest proponent of Buddhism. But the experiment went badly and resulted in the outbreak of pestilence, which was understood to be the revenge of the *kami*. The Buddha statue was thrown into a canal and the temple of the Soga clan was destroyed. This ended the first attempt at introducing Buddhism to Japan.

The second try was much more forceful and included the founding of monasteries and the import of monks, rituals and ritual objects, vestments, and literature. Carpenters and artisans came to build and decorate the temples. What is most interesting in this process is the partial adaptation of Buddhism to its Japanese environment, especially its engagement with the traditional practices, which in this process became centralized and systematized into Shinto. A relatively peaceful coexistence of Buddhism and Shinto began with this process and lasted in Japan until the awakening of nationalism in the nineteenth century. As in the case of Taoism, Shinto developed out of scattered traditional practices only after Buddhism, and with it Confucianism, had entered Japan. The worship of *kami* became Shinto. It was this competition, which transformed traditional practices into Shinto and even gave it its name.

Again we see how religions constitute each other. Only after people have encountered a different religion do they begin to reflect on their own practices in relation to those of others. The experience of difference and competition leads to the rationalization and systematization of religious practices. Initially the perception of difference dominated, for example the emphasis on teaching (*kyo*) in Buddhism and practice (*to*) in Shinto. But as we have already seen in the first failed introduction of Buddhism, there is awareness that different supernatural powers are rivals with each other. This rivalry can and has become the source of polemics between representatives of both religions.

Although at times syntheses emerged, as we will see below, we also encounter polemics throughout Japanese history, which can even escalate into persecution. During the Edo period polemics between Confucianism and Buddhism are reported. In these debates both parties seem to assume that their legitimacy as religions of foreign origin depended on their compatibility with Shinto. And prior to the persecution of Buddhism in the later nineteenth century, the Buddhist monk Ryuon identifies the Confucian scholars, the Shinto scholars, astronomers, and Christians as the groups which polemicize against Buddhism. All these examples illustrate how, in Asian history as in Western, religions have constituted each other

through polemics, distancing, and the maintenance of boundaries. We now turn to the opposite phenomenon of religious borrowings, syncretisms, and identifications.

Borrowings, Syncretism, Identifications

Even when religions constitute themselves in contrast to each other, they often also simultaneously borrow from, assimilate to, and incorporate elements of each other's practices, ideas, aesthetic representations, and vocabulary. This too is often conditioned by competition. It can be a strategy to include other religions in one's own frame, thereby subordinating them. Or it can be a response to counter their popularity and attractiveness. Whatever the reasons may be, the fact of syncretisms, borrowings, and identifications confirms that religions perceive each other as similar. I will begin with examples from Asian history.

Asian Religions

As indicated above, the relationship between Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism has at times been hostile and competitive, even leading to persecution. However, at other times we encounter fusions, syncretism, and identification. Often these contradictory trends were expressions of shifting political interests. Buddhism's introduction to China did not only cause problems based on the discrepancy between Buddhist and Confucian ethics. By the Han dynasty attempts at syntheses and identifications had already begun, especially between Buddhism and Taoism. Similarities between the two struck the eyes of contemporary observers, especially the lack of sacrificial rituals, the centrality of meditation, and the belief in the possibility of overcoming death.

Taoists even developed a teaching which ascribed to Buddhism and Taoism the same origin (*hua-hu*).

> According to this doctrine, Lao-tzu, after disappearing in the west, went all the way to India, where he converted the barbarians and became the Buddha. Therefore the founders of Buddhism and Taoism were one and the same person, for the Buddha was but an incarnation of Lao-tzu. Since the two religions originated from the same source, there was no difference between them, so that it was quite proper for the deities Buddha and Huang-Lao to be worshiped on the same altar.[4]

Despite the seeming equality between traditions implied in this myth, borrowings at the time were mostly from Buddhism, by the Taoists. Taoism as a systematized religion probably did not exist before the introduction of Buddhism to China. Instead, similar to the precursor of Shinto, we encounter a collection of scattered practices without systematized doctrines,

[4] Kenneth Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

passed on by a master, which were regarded as heterodox by the Confucians. When proto-Taoism encountered Buddhism, it borrowed from Buddhism pictorial representations, systematized teachings, and the canonization of scriptures. Moreover, proto-Taoists took advantage of the increasing numbers of Buddhist texts available in China and used them to enrich their own canon.

Syncretistic tendencies are also apparent in a public statement by emperor Taizu (1368-1398), the founder of the Ming dynasty, who emphasizes the compatibility of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism:

> It is well known that under the Heaven there is (ultimately) no duality in the Way and that the sages are essentially of one mind. They differ only on the question of personal praxis or participation in public life. In that they deliver real benefits, they are in principle all one. Let it be known to ignorant people that all three teachings are indispensable![5]

As mentioned earlier, the first attempt at introducing Buddhism to Japan was unsuccessful. However, the constellation of interests was favorable to another attempt and to a compromise between Buddhism and traditional practices. Unlike China, the legitimacy of the Japanese emperor was based on hereditary charisma created by a mythical relationship with the gods. Pragmatically, the emperor was interested in the expansion and centralization of his authority. Whereas Shinto legitimized the emperor's authority, Buddhism authorized the centralization and universalization of his domination. Without Shinto the emperor would have subverted his legitimacy, and without Buddhism his centralization project would have been more difficult. This meant that the Japanese emperor needed both Shinto and Buddhism. Indeed, precisely such a synthesis emerged.

But even the Buddhist monasteries shared the interest in integrating Shinto practices into their own, because their tributary peasants adhered to the traditional practices. Including Shinto worship in the Buddhist monastic complexes therefore bound the peasants to the monastery. Such powerful interests led to an official coexistence and the institutionalization of a partial synthesis of Shinto and Buddhism. When Emperor Shomu wanted to erect a huge statue of the Sun-Buddha, he sent a messenger to the Ise shrine in order to ask the Shinto powers whether or not this was legitimate. The oracle decided that the Sun-Buddha and the sun goddess venerated in Ise, Amaterasu, were actually one and the same.

Although there were repeated attempts to claim superiority, especially by Buddhism, this tendency towards the identification of Shinto and Buddhism continued. Local *kami* became increasingly associated or even identified with manifestations of a Buddha or

[5] Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). S. 793

Bodhisattva. Shinto deities received Buddhist names and titles and were honored through the recitation of sutras. Accordingly, the synthesis of Buddhism and Shinto became widely accepted. What began as a fusion in the interest of political centralization developed into a transformation of the religious culture of Japan and became accepted by the larger population, as one can see from the architecture of temples and shrines and their artistic decoration.

The Jesuit mission to China offers another interesting example of the mutual adaptability of religions. Christian missionaries, among them Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci and Antonio Almeida, entered China with their heads shaved wearing the garments of Buddhist monks. Accordingly, they received a warm welcome from their Buddhist "brethren," who mistook them for just another Buddhist sect. Almeida reports that the bonzes visited them every night to listen to their preaching. The altar was shown to the most important of them, and they bowed in front of the picture of Christ.

But it is not only the Buddhists who feel rather familiar with Christianity; the Jesuits also are struck by some surprising similarities between both religions of salvation.

> Ricci notes many resemblances in dogmas and rituals: the Buddhist monks recognized a kind of Trinity and the existence of paradise and hell. They practiced penitence, observed celibacy and followed the custom of alms-giving. Their ceremonies were reminiscent of the masses of the Christians: 'When they recite, their chants seem just like our plainsong.' Ricci also notes the pious images and lamps lit in the temples, and the headgear similar to that of Christian priests. The five Buddhist prohibitions to be respected by lay believers are reminiscent of the Ten Commandments of Christianity … But to Ricci and the missionaries, these resemblances were nothing but traps set by the devil.[6]

With the deterioration of their relationship polemics arose. The Buddhists claimed that the Christians stole most of their ideas and practices from them; Christian converts attempted to show that Buddhism represented a degenerated form of Christianity, a position supported by Ricci. This polemic resembles the earlier one between Taoists and Buddhists. Confucian scholars, in turn, affirmed the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity and found them equally absurd and dangerous. When the Jesuits found out that the contemporary Chinese elite actually did not hold the Buddhists in high regard, they changed their disguise. They grew their hair, changed costumes, and transformed themselves into Chinese literati. Moreover, they associated themselves with the anti-Buddhist Confucian Donglin academy. As previously with Buddhism, Ricci began to discover great similarities between classical Chinese philosophy and Christianity:

> During the last few years, whilst interpreting their works with good masters, I have found many passages which are favourable to the things of our faith, such as the unity of God, the immortality of the soul, the glory of the elect, etc.[7]

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[6] Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, transl. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 74.

[7] Ibid., 26.

In his tract "The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven," Ricci undertook his most systematic attempt at appropriating and reinterpreting Confucianism so that it would become compatible with Christianity. He received mixed reviews. Some saw in it a total misinterpretation of the classics and were either infuriated, if they understood the intention, or amused, if they saw it as a lack of erudition. The famous philologist Zhang Erqi (1612-78) praises the Christian criticism of Buddhism, but totally rejects their interpretations of the Classics:

> … their comments on the Master of Heaven are altogether inadequate as far as a true idea of Heaven is concerned … Furthermore, what they say about paradise and hell appears to differ barely at all from what the Buddhists maintain and they go even further than the latter when it comes to extravagance and nonsense.[8]

Others defended Ricci's interpretation as a contribution to a synthesis between Confucianism and Christianity, in light of similar attempts to fuse Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. It didn't work with Christianity, however, in part because of its doctrinal rigidity and claim to a monopoly on truth. Even Chinese converts to Christianity deplored this lack of flexibility.

The religious disputations at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1542-1605 CE) represent another interesting example of attempts at religious syntheses. In 1575-76, Akbar built a house of worship in which religious discussions took place after the Friday prayer, often late into the night. Originally only Islamic groups were admitted, among them orthodox scholars, Sufi mystics, and representatives of heterodox schools. Later non-Muslim groups were included, such as Brahmans and even Christian missionaries. Over the years Akbar consulted with a whole array of representatives of religions which taken together read like a lecture series in the History of Religions, among them Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. He also had an interest in magical practices.

These disputations led not only to the drawing of contrasts as well as affirmations on the part of the religious representatives, but to a renunciation of Islam and an attempt to create a new religious synthesis by the emperor. Based on his wide-ranging studies, Akbar was finally convinced that all peoples and all religions contained men gifted with reason or with charisma. Therefore, no single religion could have a monopoly on truth.

Imperial Edicts

As a rule, religious practices and institutions exist in a certain tension vis-à-vis the institutions of political authority, even where there exists only a rudimentary differentiation between those spheres. Authority always requires legitimation and religion occupies a central role in

[8] Ibid., 39.

fulfilling that requirement. Rulers, too, have to undergo certain rituals and for these generally depend on religious specialists and functionaries, be they shamans or priests. In this process religious institutions may create spaces that escape political control and potentially undermine political authority. This in turn explains why political institutions have an elementary interest in controlling religious institutions and practices. When several religions coexist or even compete with each other, this can be done in two ways. Either one religion is privileged, whereas the others are subordinated, marginalized, or even persecuted, or else one attempts to allow for the coexistence of several religions and tries to balance and manipulate their relationships for political purposes by creating competition for imperial favor.

Either way, it can be shown that political regulations through laws or edicts are, like polemics and borrowings, informed by a referential concept of religion. Edicts, for example, seldom deal with one religion alone, but quite often regulate several religious groups and communities. In cases of persecution, it often turns out that religious competitors cooperating with imperial powers are behind the edicts. These phenomena abound in premodern times.

For example, in the edicts of the Indian king Asoka (ca. 273-232 B.C.E.), we find a classification of groups compatible with the concept of religion. The 12th rock edict admonishes these groups to respect each other:

> King Priyadarsi, Beloved of the Gods, honours men of all religious communities with gifts and with honours of various kinds, irrespective of whether they are ascetics or householders. But the Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offering of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz., that there should be a growth of the essential of Dharma among men of all sects.
> And the growth of the essential of Dharma is possible in many ways. But its root lies in restraint in regard to speech, which means that there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions and that it should be moderate in every case even on appropriate occasions. On the contrary, other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions.
> If a person acts in this way, he not only promotes his own sect but also benefits other sects. But, if a person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own sect but also harms other sects. Truly, if a person extols his own sect and disparages other sects with a view to glorifying his sect owing merely to his attachment to it, he injures his own sect very severely by acting in that way. Therefore, restraint in regard to speech is commendable, because people should learn and respect the fundamentals of one another's Dharma.
> This indeed is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods that persons of all sects become well informed about the doctrines of different religions and acquire pure knowledge. And those who are attached to their respective sects should be informed as follows: 'The Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offerings of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz., that there should be a growth of the essentials of Dharma among men of all sects.'[9]

[9] Rock edict No. XII quoted after D. C. Sircar, *Inscriptions of Asoka* (New Delhi: Publication Division, Government of India, 1975), 48-49.

Another example stems from the Sassanian Empire (224-636 C.E.). After the victory over the Parthians, the Sassanians continued the tolerant policy towards non-Iranian religions. Shapur I, for example, released an edict that says:

> Magi, Zandiks (Manichaeans), Jews, Christians and all men of whatever religion should be left undisturbed and at peace in their belief.[10]

Regarding the Roman Empire, the so-called "Edict of Milan" serves as an interesting example. Lactantius reported in his work on the persecution of Christians about a meeting in the year 313 C.E. between the emperors Constantine and Licinius in Milan, in which they decided to end the persecution. The text of the letter is quite telling, since by attaining the status of a *religio licita* Christianity is explicitly compared to other religious practices. It reads:

> When I, Constantine Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, happily met at Milan and had under consideration all matters which concerned the public advantage and safety, we thought that, among all the other things that we saw would benefit the majority of men, the arrangements which above all needed to be made were those which ensured reverence for the Divinity, so that we might grant both to Christians and to all men freedom to follow whatever religion each one wished, in order that whatever divinity there is in the seat of heaven may be appeased and made propitious towards us and towards all who have been set under our power. We thought therefore that in accordance with salutary and most correct reasoning we ought to follow the policy of regarding this opportunity as one not to be denied to anyone at all, whether he wished to give his mind to the observances of the Christians or to that religion which he felt was most fitting to himself, so that the supreme Divinity, whose religion we obey with free minds, may be able to show in all matters His accustomed favour and benevolence towards us.[11]

Numerous Chinese imperial edicts also expressed religious competition, usually concerning the balance between Confucianism as a state cult and an ethos of proper conduct on the one hand, and Taoism and Buddhism on the other. Under the Northern Chou dynasty (557-581 C.E.) a debate took place in the year 568 C.E. between Taoists and Buddhists about the "Sutra on the Conversion of the Barbarians," in which Taoists claimed that the Buddha was nothing but a later incarnation of Lao-tzu and that Buddhism is nothing but a corrupted version of Taoism. Participants in this debate were Confucian scholars, but Emperor Wu himself also took part. This was obviously not just an academic debate but had an impact on religious politics. The first outcome was an official ranking of these religions: Confucianism came in first place, Taoism second, and Buddhism because of its foreign origin third. As a consequence of this debate Emperor Wu first outlawed Buddhism, but was so enraged by the obvious forgeries of the Taoists that he outlawed them as well.

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[10] Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 65.

[11] Lactantius, *So starben die Tyrannen*, trans. Pater Franz Faessler (Luzern: Rex-Verlag, 1946), Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, trans. J. L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

During the T'ang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) there existed at times bitter competitions between Taoism and Buddhism, the outcomes of which usually were decided by the emperors, their interests and personal preferences. Emperor Wu-tsung, for example, privileged the Taoists:

> The eleventh day of that moon was the Emperor's birthday, and the monarch celebrated it by inviting two Buddhist and two Taoist priests to the Palace to engage in a four-corner debate on their respective scriptures. Significantly the two Taoists were rewarded by being 'granted the purple' to wear, an honour restricted to courtiers of the fifth rank, while the Buddhists received no reward.[12]

A few years later the persecution of Buddhists began, justified through an edict issued in 845 C.E. In this edict Buddhists were accused of adhering to a foreign, barbarian religion that undermined the customs and mores of China and was responsible for the contemporary social crisis. The edict clearly expresses the competitive relationship between Buddhism on the one hand and Taoism and Confucianism on the other when it asks why such an insignificant Western religion should be allowed to compete with indigenous religions.

The edict ordered a radical secularization in the true sense of the term: monasteries were confiscated and destroyed and monks and nuns were forced to become lay people. Although the measures were primarily directed against Buddhism, other foreign religions, like Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism, were also included. Only a few years earlier the same kind of persecution had been directed against the Manichaeans. All these measures express an underlying system of classification that is quite compatible with the concept of "religion." Buddhism, Nestorianism, and Zoroastrianism are classified as foreign religions and compared to the indigenous religions of Taoism and Confucianism.

Conclusion

After all these examples it is probably in order to remind the reader what their purpose is. The goal of this essay is obviously not to write a world history of religious polemics, syncretisms, or edicts. The aim is also not to present "religion" as an *a priori* category of the human mind. The concept of religion is an analytical one, as J. Z. Smith has repeatedly and rightly insisted.[13] This essay has attempted to show that the concept of religion broadly conceived is not necessarily an imposition of a modern Western category on phenomena that are perceived and categorized totally differently in non-Western or premodern cultures. Of course other cultures and the premodern West neither employ the concept itself nor necessarily a different

[12] Edwin O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 228.

[13] J. Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms For Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

one which could be simply translated as “religion,” although at times they do. However, in their patterns of interactions they express an implicit understanding of institutions and practices that is generally compatible with modern Western notions of religion. Religious actors relate to each other as similar in kind, if different in value; they treat each other as competitors or potential partners. Religious practices are being fused with each other or juxtaposed to each other. Imperial edicts generally regulate more than one religious grouping and occasionally admonish a variety of different “religions” to get along with each other, often claiming that they all are ultimately one.

These examples contradict the postmodern assumption that non-Western religions have been constituted as such only after they encountered the West and then began modeling themselves after the Western notion of religion. This is historically inaccurate insofar as this mutual shaping of religions represents just a continuation of what has happened in the history of religion over millennia. It is certainly true that colonial definitions of religion had an impact on how colonized people systematized and canonized their religious beliefs and practices. However, we have also witnessed processes of religious systematization and canonization in situations of competition without any Western influence. Chinese Taoism and Japanese Shinto emerged as more systematized and canonized religions after Buddhism showed up as a competitor. Without belittling the impact of Western colonialism, I find suggestions that the West “invented” Hinduism, Confucianism, or Buddhism quite exaggerated and inappropriate. It would be equally problematic to claim that Buddhism has “invented” Taoism and Shinto.

What these examples seem to suggest is that in a situation of political domination and pressure the less powerful organization is forced to adapt to imposed standards and that in situations of religious competition less organized and systematized competitors have to increase their organizational efficiency in order to stay in the competition. Both scenarios may lead to similar effects in terms of strategies designed to prove that one religion fits certain officially expected requirements or that one can offer whatever the competition possesses, like sacred scriptures, a revered founder, pictorial representations, sacred music, or a systematized pantheon. Alternatively, it can also lead to the systematic outlawing of certain aspects of competing religions and the basing of one’s claim to superiority on such a difference. Independent of this strategy, religions have always been shaped positively and negatively by the pressures of political powers and religious competitors.

Obviously, the examples amassed in this chapter do not express one consistent concept of religion. This was not to be expected anyway, since such a systematized concept is the

result of processes of conceptual rationalization, the dominant case of which has primarily taken place in Enlightenment discourse. But even there it has not led to one concept of religion, but to many, often mutually exclusive, definitions.

How then do we interpret the implicit understandings of religion shown in the numerous examples? I suggested earlier that in my view there exists a rather rough notion of "religious" phenomena. Everyone "sort of" knows what is religious and what is not. The discourse on religion in such examples is not primarily an analytical one, but instead it is evaluative from a definite social position. Different social groups emphasize those aspects of the "religious" which are particularly important to them. Accordingly, intellectuals in their polemics and theological treatises tend to emphasize world-views, metaphysics, and doctrine. Bureaucrats and emperors in their edicts will emphasize primarily the contribution of religion to the maintenance of authority, order, and morality. And practitioners may be primarily concerned with the proper interaction with superhuman powers and its impact on their lives. This selective emphasis does not, however, necessarily imply that these different groups each have a different understanding of what counts as religious phenomena; it only means that they have different interests in such phenomena and value different aspects of them in different ways.

Accordingly, what constitutes "religion" in any given society and culture is not to be found simply in a "hegemonic discourse," but rather in a plurality of understandings of religion that are specific to different groups and categories of people and in their interactions with each other. Such references to the "religious" are not only expressed in public discourse, but often simply in the performance of religious practices. This essay only intended to prove the legitimacy of the concept of religion for a hermeneutical social science. How to define religion as a universally-applicable analytical concept is another question, which I will address elsewhere.

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