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Studying the Plurality of Religions in the age of globalisation?

Coping with fundamentalism, religious pluralism and loss of institutionalisation

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Modern society has been changing over the last decades, and such changes also affected religions and the study of religion. Some scholars speak about a “cultural turn” which means a shift of studying religions from a purely philological point of view to looking at religions in a broader way – taking religious practices, rituals, behaviour also into account, and not only dogmatic teachings. In this lecture I like to present a balanced view – giving you both information on religions in Germany (this means – referring to more “traditional” approaches of research and asking for challenges for religions against a background of development and social changes (this means – taking into account also new questions in studying religions). So I start with my

1st § on “Religious Pluralism in Germany”.

Today 83 million people live in Germany. Although individual adherents of non-Christian religions already were present in Germany since the early 20th century, in the 1960s so-called guest workers from Bosnia and Turkey came to Germany, being either Sunni Muslims or Alewites, bringing Islam for the first time to the awareness of many Germans. Starting in the late 1960s, also missionary gurus of diverse Hindu traditions began to spread their religions and practice in Germany, and also Tibetan Buddhist monks came as refugees. As a result of such demographic changes, Christianity has been facing some decline in percentage since that time, giving way to more pluralism. But of course, because of historical reasons, Christianity is still the widest spread religion in Germany. The Roman-Catholic Church and the Protestant Church both currently have about 24 million members, the Orthodox Churches together (mainly the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox Church) have 1.2 million members. About 115,000 people belong to one of the ethnic-based Oriental Churches (Armenians, Copts, Syrians). But also other Christian communities like the Mormons or Jehova’s Witnesses have several thousand members each. – The second largest religious group are the Muslims with about 4,500,000 people; 80% of them are of Turkish origin. Some 220,000 persons are Iranians

belonging to the Shi'i tradition within Islam and 500,000 people are Alewites. Although the number of Muslims in Germany is thus quite high, one can easily observe that Islam – in public opinion – has a low profile, and only about 20,000 persons of German origin converted to Islam. This is quite interesting to observe, when we compare this number to Buddhists in Germany; since the late 1960s the number of Buddhists has risen constantly, depending on two factors, “conversion” and migration. Nowadays about 130,000 German-born persons have taken the “three jewels”, taking refuge to Lord Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Also Buddhists from Asian countries came as refugees to Germany, totalling now to 140,000 persons. With regards to Hindus, also since the late 1970s a new situation appeared, because refugees mainly from Sri Lanka fled civil war in the home country and found a place to stay in Germany, therefore around 45,000 Tamil Hindus live here now. Another refugee group in Germany that arrived in the 1990s are several thousands of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan, seeking shelter from the persecution by the Afghan government at that time. A further group are 60,000 Hindus from North India – businessmen, students, professionals – who migrated to Germany during the last three decades. One of the most recent and significant change of religious demography in Germany appeared during the 1990s as a result of the political changes in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, when about 75,000 Jewish people mainly from the former USSR migrated to Germany, thus increasing the number of Jews to 100,000. Another significant change of the traditional religious demography in Germany started also in the 1990s, when Kurdish Yezidi believers came – mostly as refugees – from Turkey, Syria and Irak to Germany, which has not stopped until today; so presently more than 100,000 Yezidis live in Germany. But one also has to mention about 27 million people who consider themselves not linked to any institutional religion or as “un-believers”.

As already mentioned, also Buddhist from Asian countries found a new place to live in Germany; as I think this might be interesting for you, I will add some more details to this. The so-called “German Buddhist Union” is an umbrella organization and representative for “all” German Buddhists – in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between different Buddhist schools and traditions, to serve as a semi-official spokes-person for Buddhism in the public and to be a partner in inter-religious dialogue. On the whole, about 50,000 German people are interested and active in Buddhist centres. There is also a big number of people who are interested in meditation, but they do not join Buddhism formally. As can be seen from the maps there has been a significant rise of Buddhism between 1980 and 1991, which still holds on. And a second aspect revealed by both maps is the fact that even today in

the area of the former German Democratic Republic Buddhism is not so widely spread as it is in the west of Germany. Most prominent in Germany are Zen-orientated groups, particularly in recent years with a growing number of the admirers of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. At a same level of interest we find Buddhists practising Buddhism according to the Tibetan tradition of the Karma Kagyü or the Gelugpa tradition. During the last decade, also some *vipassana*-groups came into existence, partly in the tradition of S. N. Goenka or Ajahn Chah. While at least the Tibetan traditions are led by Tibetan refugee monks, the Zen groups attended by Germans are only to a minor degree in contact with people from Asian countries who live in Germany. The Singhalese monk who is in charge of a small Sri Lankan Theravada Temple in Bonn – the place where I work at the university – once told me that his temple is mainly frequented by Singhalese Buddhists only – they want to take part in rituals and puja. Some Germans now and then come by – but they are interested in meditation, not in the temple or the rituals. This difference, as observed by the Sri Lankan monk, is widely typical for Buddhism in Germany: Germans are attracted by Buddhism, because they see in it some kind of a “way of life”, doing meditation or reading Buddhist texts, while Asians want to practice all the Buddhist religion. Therefore, there is only very limited contact between German and “Asian” Buddhists. To some degree this difference of “German”/“Western” and “Asian” Buddhists in Germany is still comparable to the early days of Buddhism here. In the 19th century Buddhism was mainly known to academics, who studied Buddhist texts (of the Pali canon), but they did not practise Buddhism and had no contact with the living religion in any Buddhist country. Although there has been a change in the way that Germans now practise meditation, the separation still exists as they are not much in contact with Buddhists of an Asian background, living now in Germany.

While the highest number of Buddhists of Asian origin are the Vietnamese, the second group in numbers are Thai. They have e.g. one well-built temple near Frankfurt am Main, well organized by a German man who is married to a Thai woman. Because of to mixed marriages the number of women among Thai Buddhists in Germany is bigger than that of men. The temple close to Frankfurt – but also about twenty other small temples – tries to invite Thai monks to stay for some time in Germany to provide religious service to the people. But to my impression the Thai Buddhists in Germany have little contact with German people, who practise Buddhism.

From this overview we can conclude that the rise of religious pluralism in Germany is the result of global political changes which brought big numbers of non-Christian people to Germany, thus making it necessary both for the society as well as for the Christian churches to take this

new situation into account. On a juridical level, one has to observe that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam do not have the status as an officially acknowledged religion within Germany as it is the case with Christianity (or various Christian Churches and denominations) and the Jewish community, thus sometimes facing disadvantages in public, even if one cannot ignore prejudices against Islam. On the level of inter-religious dialogue, both the Roman-Catholic and the Protestant Churches are open to dialogue with members of other religions. Buddhist meditation (in most cases some form of Zen-inspired meditation) is also sometimes taken up by Christian ministers or priests as some kind of “Christian Zen”, finding many followers on the one hand, but from time to time also harsh repulsion both from Church-based people as well as from Buddhists.

This is the general framework of religious pluralism in Germany, which the field of studying religion has to look at. Therefore, from my point of view and my methodological approach, I will cover my

2nd § as “Studying religion and Society”.

When teaching religions at universities I think we have to define our topic as an academic discipline within humanities and social sciences. Comparative Religion is neither a philosophical nor a theological academic discipline. This is important to mention, because most of the universities in the German speaking area have a long term tradition of courses and chairs for Christian theologies – mainly Roman-Catholic or Protestant. What’s the main difference between Comparative Religion and (Christian) theologies? It is not the methods – scholars in theology and Comparative Religion use philological and anthropological methods alike; it is neither the “number” of religions studied – also researchers in theology show interest in other religions than their own Christian religion. *But* it is the position of the researcher: Any theologian has to do his research from the “inner” (or insider) perspective, and his research has to be done in the light of his own faith. The researcher in Comparative Religions may be member of one of the religions he is studying, but he must do his study from an “outer” (or outsider) perspective – neither philosophically nor theologically inclined to his study, but empirically. Therefore he cannot (and must not) deduce universal norms for mankind from the study of religion, as a theologian does from the perspective of his own religion. But the theologian and the scholar in religions have much in common, because they both analyse religions as part of the complexities between humans, societies and cultures. Thus, empirical

expressions of any religion make the starting point of every research and I think we always can approach “religions” only by two ways, namely approaching WORDS and HUMANS.

Starting with WORDS: Concentrating first on man’s heritage it is absolutely clear that we have to start with studying the religious traditions in literary or oral form; the spoken or written word in most of the religions can hardly be underestimated and therefore every researcher does a good deal by studying relevant languages for his purpose of specializing in certain religious traditions. Why focus so strongly on texts and words for studying religions? The answer is quite simple: The complexity of religious doctrines and ideas can best be caught by studying such ideas when (spoken or written) words are given. Observing or partaking in rituals alone is not sufficient to learn and understand the “meaning” of some symbolism. And besides, some major religions focus strongly on the “sacred literature” including commentaries – with all the problems of translating religious concepts in a proper way. If we don’t learn to catch the exact semantics, our translation will go astray. Thus there is a danger of changing a religious idea or miscomprehending it. Nearly four decades ago the German Indologist Paul Hacker gave some important warnings against such miscomprehension. He set our attention to the necessity to observe how a given culture puts its world-view into words and how it manages to get hold of its world-view by using words. When we then translate these words, we also must be aware of the special notion given by the obvious world-view behind the words. Even if religious studies do not make up as philological studies only, there can be no doubt about its importance if Comparative Religions tends to do justice to the historical and contemporary religious heritage of the world.

Turning now to HUMANS: If we wish to describe (and also teach) religions there is another important aspect. Focusing on texts we must remember that “text is not religion” but only part of it. Religious texts concentrate on official religion with normative aspects – e.g. concerning doctrines, religious law or monastic regulations – but there are limitations, at least the following ones.

- a) In most religions, textual tradition relates to a male point of view, most religious thinkers in history whose words have been recorded, have been men. Female voices have most the times gone unheard. It is an important task to look for such gender specific tendency in every religion, which hardly can be found in texts, but mainly in the voice of living people, foremost women.
- b) Besides the “official” side of religious texts we still have to take much more into account the “living” and “local” religion that means practicing religion by people – female and male: We

have to ask at two different levels, namely to analyse everyday religion and ways of living according to religion. We have to concentrate on all contexts of religion within the life of people, asking them how they practice, how they arrange their daily life with religion, how they see their own religious attitudes in relation to some “official” practices, in short: We must put more attention to the relationship between “popular” religion and “official” religion, by using sociological and anthropological methods. If we avoid to see this part of religion, our study will be either limited or dated. Thus we should do our best to encounter people of the religion, to learn their views and hear their perception of doctrine – with their individual short-comings and changes, too.

If the researcher in comparative religion takes interest in the “subjects of religion”, namely man, he will get deeper insight. Thus doing Comparative Religion has the possibility to come into close contact with various religions, not on a level of inter-faith dialogues, but as a dialogue with people of various religions as part of society, social life and social agency – with the scholar of Comparative Religions always trying to be neutral, giving equal rights to all religions and doing them justice. This leads to a twofold topic, the teacher or student of religions must be aware of:

a) There is the necessity to know religions well, to describe their doctrines and practices. As a result, the researcher can show that a minor or previously unknown religion within a certain area can be as good as all dominant religions within that area. Judging from the situation in Germany, this is an important point, because Germany (and Europe) had been dominated by Christianity for long centuries. Religions emerging from India, South East or in a minor degree East Asia which find new followers in Europe, therefore not seldom have been labelled as “destructive cults”, mainly because they were partly deviating from usual European patterns of behaviour. I think it is the task for the student of religions to stress that such religions may be different from traditional religions in Europe, but they are not less valuable for their adherents as a system of belief, behaviour and modes of life.

b) But there is another obligation for the researcher, too. Religions also can develop forms or practices which either suppress or injure some of the members of a religion. Then the scholar of religion will not only be allowed to criticize such harmful forms within one religion, but should try to intervene for the sake of objectivity and help for individual members of that religion. Though being neutral to all religions or being at equal distance to all religions, the researcher has the right to intervene and criticise if religions are opposing human rights, freedom of thought or bringing disadvantages to marginalised groups within a society.

So maybe, a researcher of religions can act as a “referee” and mediator between religions and society, and also in some cases even within one religion and its different internal positions. Acting as such a mediator is becoming one of the important tasks for any student of religions, the more different religions are living together within pluralistic societies nowadays, with all their different sets of behaviour, ethical options or even prejudices.

Judging from this comparative view, a researcher of religions can help to bring people to see how to accept religious ideas or behaviours of others, for the benefits of society, because since the 1960s many changes started in Europe – and later also in Asia – which lead to “modernity” and “secularisation” – with two consequences: In some minds of (younger) people, scepticism about religious traditions or the questioning of religious authorities and institutions arises; and others developed fundamentalist reactions to emphasise the fundamental (and “unchangeable”) tenets of religions. Despite such different reactions, they all were – in one way or the other – expressions of a growing “market” of religious plurality and variety as will be shown in my

3rd § as Challenges of religions in the modern world.

Any change in social life has consequences. As one consequence, the fear often arises that religion gets lost or that religious institutions lose their influence to other players or agents in the social world.

In my sub-chapter 3.1.

I therefore start with the result that religious authorities try to hinder pluralism or to reduce freedom of thinking by fostering *fundamentalist positions*. As you may know, the term “fundamentalism” originated in the late 19th century within conservative Protestant groups in the USA. They said – in reaction to modernism – that one must not leave the “fundamentals” of Christianity, meaning the only literal interpretation of the Bible, e.g. God’s creation of the world in seven days (with 24 hours each) in opposition to liberal theologians who interpreted such Biblical texts either symbolically or referred to other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories and myths, thus reducing the uniqueness of the Bible. During the 1980s, the term fundamentalism got worldwide reception as it was applied to various religious, political or social movements, which were labelled as “fundamentalism” and also characterised as movements against modernity and plurality. “Fundamentalists” reduce their ideology or religion to only one and exclusive truth, which everybody must either accept or he/she will be

at least taken as outsider of the society or even expelled or physically persecuted. In this sense, fundamentalism cannot be reconciled with plurality or freedom of thought. Both for religious individuals but also for religious institutions this becomes a challenge.

It is true that religious fundamentalism has a strong base in exclusive monotheistic traditions. But I think that every religion is open to drift towards fundamentalism – also as a response to modernity and a changing world, by trying to keep with old traditions. Looking back to the “earliest” traditions in their religion, fundamentalists say these traditions are a safeguard against the changes in modernity and they can help people to cope with every day’s challenges. But one must be critical: Mostly fundamentalists give their very own interpretation of the tradition in a restrictive way. Whoever – either as individual person or as a group – does not accept the teachings and interpretations of religious fundamentalists, is criticised as an un-believer and fiend of religion. It is well known that fundamentalists as an ideal or in reality, if they have gained social and political power, want to remove – or even extirpate – all those aspects of society and social behaviour which in their point of view are “wrong” and deviating from “god’s plan”.

In my point of view it is important to note that every religion can be fundamentalist, also in Buddhism we find this kind of exclusiveness of other teachings. In a historical perspective one can certainly refer to Sri Lanka, where Buddhist monks already in the second half of the 19th century became “fundamentalist” in a classical sense – that means: they had “learnt” from English Christian missionaries that the fundamentals of religion must be the Bible, and so Buddhist monks made themselves fundamentalists referring to the “Pali canon” as their normative (and exclusive) source of their religion. Combining these norms of religion with nationalistic dispositions, Buddhism in Sri Lanka then resulted in fundamentalism. Turning to contemporary issues, I just want to mention those fundamentalist positions among Myanmar monks – who after the decline of military rule established their interpretation of a Burmese nationalistic and fundamentalist Buddhism, leading to marginalising other religious traditions – mainly Muslim people in the Union of Myanmar, but also ethnic minorities practicing their religious traditions outside the fold of Burmese Buddhism. The so-called 969 movement and the Ma-Ba-Tha movement are well known recent examples of Buddhist fundamentalism. But, of course, fundamentalism is not necessarily connected with politics as these examples have shown. When I take Buddhism in Thailand into consideration, in my opinion, the Santi Asok movement can be labelled as fundamentalist – not for political reasons, but for their teachings

or interpretation of Buddhism, which not only excludes most Thai Buddhist practises, but which also says that Santi Asok is the only “authentic Buddhism” keeping with the fundamentals of Buddha.

Facing these – and any other – forms of fundamentalism, a scholar of religion surely will not be able to stop the rise of fundamentalism. But he can do at least one thing: By informing people about “core values” of religions – in a sense of showing their strengths and also weaknesses, he can make religions (and non-religious, maybe even atheistic people) aware that religion is not an adversary of modernity, but that religions can and must be reconciled with present day society in a balanced way. Then it might be possible to stay apart from those fundamentalists who only give “one exclusively true” interpretation of the world by neglecting any pluralism of values.

Sets of values have always brought forward ethics – different, but available in all religions. As *my next sub-chapter 3.2*

I like to refer to one important – and relatively recent – common challenge for all people and religions: to save *nature and environment* by avoiding pollution or exploitation of natural resources. Commitment in this field – in Europe – started slowly at the beginning of the 20th century, but strongly only during the last decades. Most of this engagement or groups fostering such activities for environment does not officially refer to religious options. Maybe this has been a reaction against “Christian” positions in the past. Referring to the Biblical creation story with the verse “multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth”, Christian tradition has now and then legitimised the exploitation of natural resources. But one must not be unfair: Also within the churches in Western Europe activities have started since several decades ago – calling for some kind of “ecology of theology or spirituality”, by re-interpreting the just mentioned Biblical quotation – not to exploit nature, but using nature as god’s gift for the benefit of all humans. So within Christian theology new readings of the “sacred scriptures” are encouraged to search for a balanced relationship between human beings and nature – as both are equal parts of god’s creation.

Also Buddhism sees – like other religions – these challenges for mankind, but I think one can mention one important difference related to Christianity: Christianity – due to its cultural

background rooted partly in ancient Greek philosophy – traditionally had a clear hierarchy: humans as the most important part of god’s creation, thus being strongly superior to animals as living beings, and of course also superior to all other forms of “nature”. Buddhism due to the idea of rebirth could never develop such a hierarchy that humans are superior to other beings, so all beings had to be handled with *metta* and *karuna*. Theoretically this had deep consequences for Buddhists in relation to “nature”, even if everybody will admit that not all Buddhists always have accepted their responsibility to care for an ecological treatment of nature, because of gaining – individual or collective – advantages from natural resources, just as Christians have done. But I think, there are lots of fields where from a religious point of view also Buddhists can engage in ecology. In 1993, the so-called “Parliament of World’s Religions”, held in Chicago, discussed the document “Towards a Global Ethic. An initial declaration” which was supported by many religious leaders, also from the Buddhist side. One of the topics (or commitments) of the documents was the acceptance of respect for life and the sustainability and the care for the earth. But all such considerations have to be aware that they have to take into account the competition of different interests – search for economic profit and religious traditions who might favour ecology. So every religion has to find the middle way between economy and ecology, which seems – at least partly possible – if we consider the following points. One has to take the earth (or the “political” world) as one whole system where all people live and want to develop their communities. This needs to find a balance between the interest of a certain religion and its own religious specific ideas and the obligation – of individuals and collectives – for all human beings and their “well-being”. That means to preserve environment so that every single being can survive – and thus, from a Buddhist point of view, avoid harm to all living beings. I think questions which will be covered in a research project on “Environmental Management in Buddhist Context“ are – at least on a local context – excellent examples not only to study the context of Buddhist environmental concepts in theory, but also to look for the practical engagement of monks and temples in preserving environment and thus improving the way of living for all beings. Such practices for saving „nature and environment“ can help to avoid or reduce poverty and create a just and fair economic order, as was mentioned as one of the aims of the document about „global ethic“ from 1993. So I think that studying religions, opens lots of opportunities to contribute to the benefit of mankind and society, as such studies – sometimes, not always – can try to help to overcome “worldly problems”.

In my opinion religions have a strong obligation to improve the way of living, to contribute positively to all aspects of life in “this world” – and not only in the future “afterlife” –, this leads me to my last *sub-chapter 3.3*.

which deals with *sexuality* and *gender* topics. From a European or western point of view, we can take the 1960s as a starting point of an ethical discourse about sexuality, sexual liberation and sexual values that has not stopped until today. Even though such discussions first took place in Western societies, all religions nowadays have to (re-)consider their own positions related to sexuality within marriage and regarding the questions of extra- and pre-marital relations, and in a broader sense all gender issues – topics which in the course of history were often treated in an unfair or at least unequal treatment regarding women as inferior to men. But there is – in recent time – another aspect which must be taken into account. When talking about “male” or “female” we must be aware of a double approach. We are either talking about sex – that means about the biological body as man or woman; or we are talking about gender – that means about the social situation which is related to the sexual and social identity as man or woman. While “sex” is defined by birth, “gender” is made by culture. On an ethical level such an approach leads to the first consequence: Taking gender identity seriously, it becomes at least questionable to give a hierarchy of sexual behaviours, starting with heterosexual relations as the “normal” or regular case, and considering other forms of sexual orientations like homosexuality or bisexuality or various sexual practices as deviation from a “normative” sexual orientation.

This leads to the present challenge of religious ethics: As most religious traditions basically take it for granted that only a male-female binary system exists – both in biological sex and sexual identity –, religious values also face opposition from the side of “sexually liberated persons” or from arguments raised in social and anthropological discourses about gender issues, underlining that sexuality must be seen as one (important) aspect of human relationships and life in general. Therefore sexuality can no longer be restricted to heterosexual relationships or marriage. Within Christianity – stronger within Catholicism than within Protestantism – the traditional connection of marriage with sexuality (and procreation) is strongly losing ground among followers of this religion, but also Buddhists – partly because of “western influence”, partly because of a different Buddhist world view regarding birth in the circle of life and death – in recent decades started to question traditional sexual values. Because any form of sexuality which does not disturb individual human rights or the dignity of the other and which is based

on equality between the partners involved in it must be taken as a possibility for shaping a person's sexual identity.

But there is another aspect which has to be mentioned in any discussions of sexuality namely the private sphere. During history one can observe the general rules regulating social life and being accepted in society were wide-spread and deviation from such rules lead to stigmatisation or even to legal actions against the “deviant” person. With a turn to individual responsibility – at the latest starting with the “sexual revolution” in the 1960s – sexual norms of the society were questioned, leading to pluralistic possibilities of individual sexual identities and orientations. In an ethical discourse of sexuality in a globalised world, such values cannot be separated from religious practices or orientations, but these values cannot be restricted to raising children and to heterosexuality within marriage – being legitimized by a one-sided interpretation of Biblical or Buddhist texts without taking into account the social situations of centuries long gone, which are not applicable in modern society.

What are the ethical consequences for religions and societies? When throughout history sexuality was often regulated by legal norms, which originated from religious values, such norms created a small set of allowed and a larger set of forbidden or at least “deviating” practices. As these regulations or norms were often expressed from a male point of view (both in Christianity and in Buddhism), they violated both Christian and Buddhist values saying that all humans are equal. One of the ethical tasks in a contemporary society is therefore to make people aware that any ideas about sexuality are deeply rooted in different strands of diverse traditions, which never must be reduced to a simple solution. Within Religious Studies it is therefore necessary to discuss and analyse such traditions and views of sexuality, which often originated one-sided in a male (and not female) brain – and which until today often exclude women on an institutional level from filling positions either as Roman Catholic priestesses or as Theravada Buddhist nuns. Discussions about such topics cannot be solved from the point of Comparative Religions, but solutions to such challenges must be found by theological and/or philosophical discourses among the relevant religion. But the scholar of Comparative Religions maybe can contribute to – sometimes heated – discussion with his unbiased analysis as an outsider of the concerned religions.

Let me come to a short conclusion as the **4th paragraph**.

Comparative Religions has developed within the late 19th century at universities in Europe from a mainly European point of view. More than one century of research has brought some fascinating insights into the world of religions, but there have also been some short-comings due to focusing research from a European perspective. Therefore I think it will be good and necessary for the future, to broaden our approach to studies of religions first in that way, that Comparative Religions should gain more importance also at universities outside European spheres of thought. But of course, equally necessary, is that European scholars in religion learn from people in Asian countries. As I have mentioned before – and also by describing the situation of religions in Germany – looking to the study of religions only through “European eyes”, the scholar often only sees half the truth. Because often study of religion (in Europe) is still based on questions and interpretations, that have their roots in Christianity as a main aspect of European culture – but sometimes such basics also lead the scholar to wrong conclusions. This as a concluding methodological warning to avoid mistakes in interpreting religions as an “outsider”:

How can one avoid this: I think a student of Comparative Religions – in an idealistic case – has to develop various competences. The first point is an excellent knowledge of the history of religion, covering at least two different religions, say e.g. Theravada Buddhism and Catholic Christianity (to keep in line with some of my examples) – or put it broader: One religion of a so called “monotheistic” setting and the other of a contrary type, maybe also a traditional religion of Africa or of the highlanders in Myanmar. While this competence relates to the (classical) field of “history of religion”, another competence of the researcher should be his or her ability in some methods in social sciences or sociological and political theories, as religions always are deeply intertwined into society. By combining such methodological approaches, a researcher in religion will be able to study his subject in an interdisciplinary way which is necessary to analyse, interpret, understand and communicate religions in a globalised world.

This interdisciplinary approach for studying religions ist also necessary, because religions are a part of society and culture – fields which are studied within humanities and social sciences alike. This means of course that also other researchers in the humanities cover aspects of “religion(s)” in their research, say e.g. rituals, mythological texts, forms of institutionalisation or questions of “identity” and mutual exchanges of ideas – sometimes leading to “syncretism” or re-arranging of traditions. Such examples show that “religion” is not a topic which is (or should / can be) studied exclusively by the scholar of religions. But I think, the special field of

“Comparative Religions” has two aspects which always have to be the centre of research: Comparison and the “religious community”, which can be the core points for the research: Comparison on different levels allows the researcher to understand religious phenomena in their broader contexts, and help by the way of comparison to see clearly both the common topics and the diverse aspects of religions – which makes it possible to evaluate the importance of religions in the modern world. Looking at the religious community, the researcher always has a group to “correct” his interpretation, but also to share knowledge of “insiders” with the researcher which might help him or her to give a balanced description of religions.

With such a way to study religions, no religion theoretically should be excluded from one’s research – traditional religions, so called “dead” or extinguished religions and new religions are all in the same way important to understand the history and presence of humankind. Religion(s) have always been one factor shaping history and society. They have changed throughout history – due to the authority of religious institutions, of political leaders, of individual choices of leaving one religion or joining another one – and so on. In present days of globalisation religious institutions face challenges by individuals – this is not new; they face challenges by people who want to make use of religion for their own political and economic advantages, also such processes happened in history. So I think, globalisation brings further dynamics to the world of religions, but religions have not lost their importance in the globalised 21st century.