

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

THE STUDY
OF RELIGION

Edited by

MICHAEL STAUSBERG

and

STEVEN ENGLER

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016944781

ISBN 978-0-19-872957-0 (hbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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CHAPTER 2

HISTORICIZING AND TRANSLATING RELIGION

GIOVANNI CASADIO

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The aim of this chapter is to justify the general application of the taxon ‘religion’ as a unitary analytical concept situated in history, and to locate religions as interculturally translatable and communicable systems of beliefs and practices related to superhuman agents.
- A series of case studies disprove the common idea that religion was an exclusive invention of modern European scholarship.
- Both ordinary people and scholars across diverse world traditions and various historical epochs not only conceptualized their religion as a specific realm but also talked about religions as a cross-cultural taxonomic category.

HISTORY

“History is not the past; it is an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future. In this way, history verges upon that idea of tradition in which it is identified with the resource out of which people create. History and tradition are comparable in dynamic; they exclude more than they include, and so remain open to endless revision” (Glassie 1995, 395). This feisty definition of history by prominent American folklorist Henry H. Glassie III echoes the views of British historian Edward H. Carr who sees in history a “continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (Carr 1986 [1961], 30), in a vein that makes him, if not a precursor of postmodernist history, a supporter of

epistemological relativism, stressing that the facts of history never come to us pure, but are always refracted through the mind of the historian in a delicate balance with empirically derived evidence.

To put the issue in a different perspective, since Hegel it has been conventional for historians to distinguish between *res gestae* (the *res*, things or events that have actually happened) and *historia rerum gestarum* (the story of the events that have happened); the distinction is between the data of historical events themselves and the representation of those events in the historian's report. We are used to referring to both historical events themselves and the timelines of these events as 'history' in a somewhat undifferentiated way. But even the *res gestae* are a re-presentation (a 'making present again' in a text) of what took place, and not the actual events themselves on the ground. This is not to say that those events did not take place. Of course they did: people believed in a higher power and people lived and died *in the name of God*. But how we learn about those 'things' is always 'mediated,' available to us only in indirect form in images or narratives. We of course continually experience events immediately, but when we give or read an account of those events as *historia rerum gestarum*, we are giving or reading a mediated version of them from a particular point of view, which is shaped by our own time, by the context within which the re-presenting work occurs (in this sense B. Croce said that "all history is contemporary history," meaning that all history was written from the point of view of contemporary preoccupations).

HISTORICIZING

Historicizing a topic implies interpreting it as fully embedded in its own society ("Religion without Society" does not interest a modern historian [Brown 2003, 6]) and as a product of historical development. Persons and actions conceived of as historical are mutable as the result of a process involved in the flux of time. To stress this fact a pioneer of the historical-comparative method in the history of religions, Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959), used to say that every *phainomenon* ('phenomenon,' 'manifestation') is a *genomenon* ('event in formation, subject to continuous change'); in other words, every religious phenomenon is a historical occurrence located in its own spatial and temporal context (Pettazzoni 1954, 69). But Pettazzoni, is far from denying the specific value of religious phenomena, and in fact he acknowledges as one of the merits of religious phenomenology the effort of "discerning the essence of religion itself," as his student Ugo Bianchi put it (1975, 199; cf. Eliade 1969, 29–30). In fact 'essences'—in the sense of the intrinsic nature or indispensable quality of something that determines its character and development—are in my opinion an inescapable component of human history, including the multifarious variety of Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist formations.

Further, historicizing means also taking a distance, becoming aware that here and now is not like there and then, and also becoming aware that we address the past and the other from our personal contemporary point of view, trying to approach and define

what things have been like and what they meant in the past and for the other. As a matter of fact, almost all of today's religions use the past (sometimes a constructed past) as a revitalizing resource in their self-understanding; in other words, they see themselves as traditions (see Engler forthcoming). Both old and new religions conceive of themselves not as innovations, "but as a 'return' to the past, as a recovery of their myth of origin" (Beyer 2006, 119).¹ In sum, it is vital for a religion to have a history, the longer the better. In the absence of a recognized tradition, founders of new religions invent it, as in the case of Mormonism (new scriptures, baptism for the dead) or Sikhism (Guru Gobind Singh molding the heritage of Guru Nanak with foundation of the *khalsa*, the Sikh church, in 1699).

TRANSLATION

Translating (lit. to 'transfer' or 'carry over' from one place to another) is a way of highlighting the similarity and preserving the difference. Religious translation is a case of broader cultural translation, a practice aiming to bridge cultural differences and to present a cultural trait to representatives of another culture. By making the 'other' understandable, translation solves some critical issues of cultural variety, in its specific aspects such as ways of speaking, ways of eating, ways of dressing, or ways of believing. The main problem—considered by some an impossible task—that cultural (religious) translation must cope with consists in giving a universal meaning to a specific cultural feature without potentially playing down the original element (for instructive examples of the difficulties involved in religious translation see Lieu 2009; Tommasi 2014). Frequently, the re-conceptualization of the original vision into a different one can produce conflicts and the persecution of minorities, as happened in eighteenth-century Korea when Confucian sages converted to Catholicism tried to pour new Christian wine into old Confucian wineskins by founding *chu-gyo*, the 'religion of the Lord' (Cawley 2012), or in nineteenth-century Iran when the Bab, by introducing messianic overtones somewhat inspired by Christian doctrines, attempted to initiate a new prophetic cycle into the Muslim system, meeting with rigid and violent clerical and political opposition.

The concept and practice of translation is particularly salient in ages dominated by human migration and globalization (Beyer 2006). Translation seems to enable mediation on a general basis while at the same time allowing individual languages to retain their own particularity, including in a certain way their own elements of untranslatability. Cultural translation thus operates as a tool which apparently succeeds in resolving tensions between universalism and relativism, cultural fixity and historical changes (see Bhabha 1994).

¹ Beyer finds here a historical and sociological fact that re-echoes the Eliadean phenomenological concept of the 'nostalgia for origins' (Eliade 1969).

TRANSLATING RELIGION

Just as cultural translation implies the notion of culture, religious translation implies the notion of religion, which thus needs to be defined (see Stausberg/Gardiner, “Definition,” this volume). According to a dominant recent narrative, the concept of ‘religion’ (which is inappropriately confused with the term *religio* and its vernacular derivatives) as a distinct and differentiated sphere of human activity and communication is a recent Western formation (dating to the middle of the eighteenth century according to Platvoet 1999, 466, 477). In spite of the overwhelming recent literature supporting this view (partially discussed in Casadio 2010, 301–304) this scholarly opinion is unfounded, as it has been empirically assessed on independent grounds and using different strategies by social scientists with a solid historical background (Beyer 2006, esp. 11, 62–79, 113–115; Riesebrodt 2010; 2013) and historians of religions (Casadio 2010; Deeg/Freiberger/Kleine 2013). Apparently, “those critiques of the modern category of religion which point out its indebtedness to theological, scientific and political interests are accurate as concerns their analysis, but incorrect in their conclusion that religion is therefore ‘not real’” (Beyer 2006, 113). It must be admitted that we perceive religion as a discrete concept only when a group’s explicit or implicit conceptions of a superhuman agency “are confronted, peacefully or violently, by another group’s analogous representations. Religion as a concept presupposes the diversity of religions, even if those religions have not been conceptualized as such” (Benavides forthcoming). Only after a community has encountered a different religion does it begin to reflect on its own practices in relation to those of the others. The experience of difference and competition leads to the rationalization and systematization of religious practices (Riesebrodt 2004, 137–138). In other terms, the notion of religion as a distinct domain of culture can hardly be found in a preliterate society living in relative isolation from other groups. But this is true of any other realm of social life, like politics, economics, law, or science. It is in any case important to keep in mind that the lack of a clearly defined concept and univocal term for a specific phenomenon does not ipso facto indicate the absence of that to which the concept refers in more general comparative context. Ancient Greeks, for example, lacked the categories ‘economy,’ ‘society,’ ‘culture,’ etc., but we can study the fields covered by them using our own categories without committing any epistemological violence. In other words, we can recognize that some of the assumptions we bring to these terms in an analysis of an alien context can influence our way of understanding without implying the inexistence of the object of study, much less the claim that it is fantasy. No matter how different a religion is from ‘our’ concept of religion, if it were totally different it would not be possible to speak about it at all (attempts at translation would simply not work): the fact that common people (and scholars of all disciplines) continue to use the category implicitly indicates that they believe translation is possible.

As has been forcefully argued by Riesebrodt (2004; 2010) against discursive deconstructions of religion as a universal concept, the evidence of an analogous (cf. Bianchi 1975, 4–8, 200, 207, 214–215) intercultural notion of religion comes from the patterns of

interactions by heterogeneous actors, and institutions that are usually referred as ‘religious’ by scholars and others and practically construct and recognize each other as similar. Religions mutually constitute, define, and transform each other; they compete with and borrow from each other, incorporating elements of each other’s practices, ideologies, and liturgies. In short, the reality itself of these competitions, conversions, borrowings, and assimilations confirms that religions perceive each other as similar (Riesebrodt 2004, 138–142). Riesebrodt (2010) provides examples of mutual references of religions in terms of competitive demarcations as well as acculturations or identifications, showing 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 akin to other religions; or how political powers have regulated the practices of diverse religions in their legislations. At a more theoretical level, my goal is to legitimate the use of the analytical concept of religion as a ‘concrete universal’ (Bianchi 1975, 200; see also Shushan 2009, 9–24, for a reappraisal of universals in relationship with the issue of cultural similarities), “a universal whose connotation is so particularized that it denotes one concrete reality especially an organized unity as distinguished from a universal that denotes any one of a class” (Merriam-Webster), based on diverse evidence situated in concrete historical contexts. Thus religion becomes not just a label of convenience, but a specific operative category and a name for a commonality of style in the social world that humans have inhabited, do inhabit, and will inhabit.

The following sections present a series of historical case studies that exemplify and concretize the theoretical agenda of this introductory premise. As we will see, religions were always already there and shaped each other for centuries or even millennia before modern Western Christian-centric discourse supposedly invented, constructed, or even manufactured anything and everything under the sun. In fact, the very idea of a Western unified concept of religion is an essentialist stereotype whose flaw is demonstrated by empirical evidence (Riesebrodt 2010; 2013, xix; cf. Freiburger 2013, 24–25). We have, in any case, to resist firmly the temptation of ethnocentrism involved in positing that some human faculty may have been the sole discovery (or, even worse, invention) of Europeans from which the refined civilizations of Asia were excluded (cf. Pye 1994, pleading for an overcoming of both Westernism and Orientalism).

Classical Antiquity

Among ancient Mediterranean cultures, Greece is considered the matrix of almost all the compartments of human intellectual activity (from science to philosophy, history, and politics). Instead, the category religion is in general regarded as extraneous to its genuine ‘emic’ conceptions, insofar as Greek religion is conceived of as tightly embedded in other aspects of Greek culture. This is in fact the dominating paradigm adopted and circulated by the field’s leading scholars (e.g. J.-P. Vernant, J. N. Bremmer, Ph. Borgeaud). Greek self-consciousness would probably not have been so acquiescent with this modern (*viz.* postmodern) assumption. There was a clear consciousness of

the specificity of religion as an autonomous aspect of human life within the Aristotelian school (Theophrastus, composer of a treatise *Peri eusebeias*, and Eudemus, who wrote a comparative essay on the theogonies of various nations, including the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and his own compatriots, the Greeks), the Epicurean school (Philodemus, who authored another treatise *Peri eusebeias*), and especially among the followers of Plato (Plutarch and Porphyrius in particular). Since the fifth century, reflections on religion as a human capacity and a universal category were central to the thought of the Sophists: Protagoras's agnosticism vis-à-vis the gods, Prodicus of Ceos, giving a rationalistic explanation of the origin of deities that foreshadowed Euhemerus's famous scholarly fiction, Critias, deeming that religion was invented to frighten men into adhering to morality and justice. Further, an examination of the semantic development of terms like *eusebeia/theosebeia* ('reverence towards the gods,' 'piety') or *threskeia* ('religious worship,' the meaning of which evolved to 'religion' *sic et simpliciter* in modern Greek) in literary and epigraphic sources (Foschia 2004) allows us to put forward a description of Greek religion "as constituting a complex and quite subtle statement about what the world is like and a set of responses for dealing with that world" (Gould 1983, 2). This confirms the existence, in the Greek linguistic domain, of a taxon corresponding to the category religion in current modern usage.

Unlike the Greeks, and since the beginnings of their history the ancient Romans had in their vocabulary a specific word to define the concept of religion: *religio*—a Latin word with a remarkable semantic history, which is attested in many literary and epigraphic documents denoting a clear consciousness of the existence of a distinct sphere corresponding to 'religion' in its later meanings (Casadio 2010). The culmination of the semantic development is evident in a document which has a remarkably practical and political relevance. Lactantius (c.240–c.320) reported in his work *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (*On the Death of the Persecutors*; Lactantius 1954, 48, 2–12) about a meeting in the year 313 CE between the emperors Constantine and Licinius in Milan, in which they decided to stop the persecution. The text of the edict is quite telling in several respects, since by attaining the status of a *religio licita* Christianity is explicitly compared to other *religiones*. Here are the salient passages:

When I, Constantine, and I, Licinius, happily met at Milan ... 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 (*religionem*) each one wished, in order that whatever deity 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 ... 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 (*religioni*) which he felt was most fitting to himself, so that the supreme deity, whose religion (*religioni*) we obey with free minds, may be able to show in all matters its usual favor and benevolence towards us. (Riesebrodt 2010, 39 [modified]; cf. Riesebrodt 2004, 144)

Christian Middle Ages

The importance of the medieval (cf. Biller 1985) and later historical development of the word/concept *religio* is demonstrated by the fact that in most but not all European languages (significant exceptions are three Slavic and two Finno-Ugric languages, that have all preserved their indigenous denominations) the term used to define the field of religion is directly or indirectly derived from the Latin name *religio*.

The process of historicization and demarcation of the notion of religion as a segment of culture and a category (the denomination used can be *secta*, *lex*, *fides*, or *religio*, all terms that have specific meanings but that in a certain context assume that of religion as a coherent notion defining a range of human words) through the late Christian Middle Ages is expounded through the works of three prominent members of the Catholic clergy who were also cosmopolitan men of letters with pan-European sensibilities.

French scholastic philosopher Peter Abelard (1079–1142) in the *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian* represents a Philosopher (remarkably enough a secular Arab with a Stoic education), a Jew, and a Christian arguing over the nature of humanity's ultimate happiness, and the best path to reach it (Abelard 2001). The Jew claims that the law of the Old Testament is the path to ultimate human happiness. For the Philosopher the true happiness must be achievable in this life with human means by the person who seeks virtue. The Christian argues that real happiness is attainable only in the afterlife as a spiritual bliss coming through the love and intelligence of God.

Catalan Franciscan Ramon Llull (c.1232–c.1315) in the *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis* (the *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, c.1274–1276) deals with the three laws or religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with a minimum of apologetic implications without assuming that what happens in the other monotheistic religions is idolatry or mere fanaticism (Llull 1993). Two things draw one's attention in the *Book of the Gentile*. First, the systematic presentation of the principles of the Mosaic Law and of that of Islam, with an extensive knowledge of the contents of both, which was not common among writers of religious polemic at this time. Second, the narrative frame which informs the treatise. A Gentile, that is a pagan or non-believer who is ignorant of monotheism, consents to learn the redeeming doctrine through the teachings of three wise men, one Jewish, one Christian and one Muslim. After instructing the disciple upon the existence of a single God, creation, and resurrection, each one presents in detail his own religion or creed (*fides*, *creensa* in Catalan) so that the listener and the reader might choose the good religion.

Nicholas of Kus^S—or Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), a German Catholic cardinal and philosopher—in his *De pace fidei* (1453), written in response to the news of the fall of Constantinople under the Turks, introduces a discussion that takes place in “the heaven of reason” (*in caelo rationis*) between the Incarnate Word (*Verbum/Logos*) and several earthly “intellectual powers” representing diverse (seventeen) national competing traditions (a Greek, an Italian, an Arab, an Indian, a Chaldean, a Jew, a Scythian, a Frenchman, a Persian, a Syrian, a Spaniard, a German, etc.). Throughout this discussion, Nicholas supports the recognition by all the sages that there is one religion (*religio*) and

worship (*cultus*), which is presupposed “in all the diversity of rites (*rituum*)” (Cusanus 1956, 7). So long as there are enlightened rulers and an insistence on dialogue between these representatives of the diverse religious denominations (*sectae*), peace can be lasting. Further, “since truth is one and since it is not possible that it is not be understood by every free intellect, all diversity of religions (*religionum*) will be led to one orthodox faith (*fidem*)” (Cusanus 1956, 10). In these claims, Cusanus, swinging between religious exclusivism and religious pluralism, theoretically affirms both the diversity of rites and the universality of religious expression found in a shared Logos theology, and practically defends a commitment to religious tolerance on the basis of the notion that all diverse rites are but manifestations of one true religion. While convergence and substantial unity of the religions is realized at the level of their common participation in the cosmic Word of God, distinctions are nonetheless maintained between the various differing religious and moral customs of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, in accord with Cusanus’s formulation: “a unity of religion in a variety of rites” (*una religio in omni diversitate rituum*). With respect to our present concern, in Cusanus’s highly influential treatise, the lemma *religio* translates both ‘religion’ as a metaphysical essence according to the Neo-Platonic tradition and, remarkably enough, ‘religion’ as a concrete and discrete historical category: “every religion, including that of the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and all the other humans” (*omnis religio—Iudaeorum, Christianorum, Arabum et aliorum plurimorum hominum* [Cusanus 1956, 40; cf. Stünkel 2013], introducing the important notion of interreligious ‘topologies’).

Early European Modernity

The culmination of this semantic and conceptual process is evident in two quite different documents of early European modernity, but many more could be cited. One is the *Colloquium heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis* (“Colloquium of the Seven regarding the hidden secrets of the sublime things”) written around 1590 by the French statesman, and political and religious theorist, Jean Bodin (1530–1596). It is a conversation about the nature of truth between seven highly educated representatives of various religions and worldviews (collectively denominated *religiones*): a natural philosopher, a Calvinist, a Muslim, a Roman Catholic, a Lutheran, a Jew, and a skeptic. Truth, in Bodin’s view, commands universal agreement; and the adepts of Abrahamic religions in the end agree with secular philosophers on the fundamental underlying similarity of their worldviews despite the diversity of their beliefs. They also agree that the freedom of conscience should be respected, because one should not be constrained in matters of religion (*religio*), and that beliefs should be voluntarily embraced, not imposed. Although the author deliberately leaves this discussion open and without a definite conclusion, the dialogue relies on the views of the adept of natural religion who states that the laws of Nature (a personalized and quasi-divine entity) and natural religion are sufficient for salvation. The conclusion is that whatever will be true religion (*vera religio*) each of them should seek it through piety and integrity of life (*pietatem ac vitae*

integritatem). The other document is *Relazione della China* (“Report on China”) drafted in 1666 by the Italian scientist and traveler Lorenzo Magalotti (1637–1712) after an interview with the Austrian Jesuit Johann Grueber. Magalotti, reporting Grueber’s words, states that the Chinese have full freedom to profess “their ancient religions (*religioni*)” (Magalotti 1974, 47), religions that he then refers to as sects (*sette*), consisting of the Confucians (called *letterati*, i.e. literati), the Taoists (the communality of people), and the Buddhists (called *bonzi*). Clearly, in the view of two experts of intercultural relations like Bodin and Magalotti, *religio*/religion both defines a cross-cultural reality (separated from other culture segments, like economy, marriage, cookery, etc.) and a specimen of this reality.

Between Europe and Asia in the Middle Ages

This section draws attention to frequently ignored evidence of theological disputations between spokesmen of the three Abrahamic monotheist religions, each trying to demonstrate the pre-eminence of their religion with the aim of converting the sovereign, and subsequently his subjects, to that religion (Oişteanu 2009, 142–149). Between the seventh and the tenth centuries, the Khazars formed an empire in the south of Russia. This empire was in competition with two superpowers of the time: the Byzantine Empire (Christian Orthodox) and the Caliphate of Bagdad (Muslim). At some point between 740 CE and 920 CE, the Khazar royalty and nobility (originally practicing the traditional Turkic religion, i.e. Tengrism with features of shamanism) appear to have converted to Judaism, perhaps to deflect competing pressures from Arabs and Byzantines to accept either Islam or Orthodoxy. According to Arab and Hebraic sources, the Khazar King Bulan is said to have converted first to Judaism following angelic visitations exhorting him to find the true religion. Bulan is then said to have convened a theological disputation between exponents of the three Abrahamic religions. Having questioned the Muslims and the Christians as to which of the other two laws they considered the better—both chose that of the Jews—he finally decided to adopt Judaism as the religion of his nation when he was convinced of its superiority. This account attests that in those remote times both political authorities and authors of chronicles were very conscious that religious faiths and laws were something quite distinct from the cultures in which they were ‘embedded’ and that they could be transferred or translated into another society.

Another instructive case is that concerning the conversion to Orthodox Christianity of Vladimir, grand prince of Kievan Rus’, following the theological dispute that took place in Kiev in 988. The *Chronicle of Nestor*, Russian *Povest vremennykh let*, “Tale of Bygone Years” (Nestor 1953), which was compiled about 1113, reports that in the year 987 Vladimir sent envoys to inquire about the forms of worship of the various nations whose representatives had been urging him to embrace their respective faiths. Of the Muslim Bulgarians of the Volga the envoys reported there was no happiness among them, only sorrow and a dreadful stench. They also reported that Islam was unattractive

due to its taboo against alcoholic beverages and pork. Other sources describe Vladimir consulting with Jewish envoys, and questioning them about their religion but ultimately rejecting it as well, because their exile was evidence that they had lost the favor of God. His emissaries also visited Roman Catholic Germans, without being particularly impressed by their ceremonials. Ultimately Vladimir opted for Orthodox Christianity after his ambassadors had exalted the dazzling festival ritual of the Byzantine Church. Being both impressed by the account of his envoys and attracted by the political gains of the Byzantine alliance, Vladimir settled on being baptized, taking the Christian name of Basil. What is most remarkable for our purpose, the chronicler ‘Nestor,’ writing in Old Church Slavonic but familiar with Byzantine and Latin literature, demonstrates an accomplished understanding of the comparative religious topics at issue and the connected problems of terminology. In his report of the events taking place in 986–988 CE, he adopts two precise Russian terms to define individually the three Abrahamic religions, the native East Slavic paganism, and also religion as a category comprehending all the religious realities at issue. These terms used evenly with the evident meaning of religion are *věra/běpa* (‘faith’), translating Greek *pistis* and Latin *fides*, and *zakon/zakonъ* (‘law,’ but also ‘custom’), translating Greek *nomos* as well as Latin *lex*. Two examples from the chronicle of the year 986 are by themselves quite explicit: (1) “Vladimir was visited by Bulgars of Mohammedan faith (*věra*), who said, ‘Though you are a wise and prudent prince, you have no law (*zakon*). Adopt our law (*zakon*), and revere Mahomet.’ Vladimir inquired what was the nature of their faith (*věra*).” (2) “Then came the Germans, asserting that they were come as emissaries of the Pope. They added, ‘Thus says the Pope: Your country is like our country, but your faith (*věra*) is not as ours. For our faith (*věra*) is the right.” (my translation).

one

Islamicate Western Asia

The primary source of any notion of religion in the Islamic world is not surprisingly the Qur’an. Like Judaism and Christianity, early Islam emerged through contrast and distinction from 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 legitimate form of religion, the latter the illegitimate one. Besides the auto-representational concepts of *islam* (submission to God’s will) and *iman* (‘faith’) which define Mohammed’s religion and are contrasted with the other book religions, in the Qur’an we find the relational and comparative concepts of *din* and *milla* (Haussig 1999, 194–243). Regardless of its controversial etymology (Semitic or Iranian), *din* is a key term in the Qur’an where it recurs 92 times. It embraces the entire range of the meanings of religion in contemporary Latin Christian usage, namely that of *religio*, *lex*, and *fides*, including the theological, practical, and social semantic sphere of the word religion. In a series of cases *din* is used to denominate religion as a category including the *vera religio* of the Muslims contrasted to the *falsa religio*—I adopt consciously the Augustinian terminology—of both the Arab

polytheists and the Jewish and Christian monotheists, such as in suras 85 and 109; the latter is particularly telling in this regard: “To you be your din, and to me mine” (trans. A. Arberry, modified). Although less frequent in the Qur’an than *din*, *milla* (plural *milal*) similarly conveys the meanings of religion in its practical and social aspects, and it is characteristically used in an apologetic-polemic context. Following the author of the Qur’an who, in his penchant to classify humanity into distinct categories of believers and disbelievers of two different kinds, clearly possesses a distinct notion of religion as a category, a series of Muslim scholars of the Abbasid period (750–1258) extended and generalized that notion, until it assumed a universal dimension, in erudite works verging between the genre of heresiography and that of a rudimentary kind of history of religions.

A referential, i.e. explicitly denoting or designating or naming, comparative concept of religion is first clearly expressed in the *Book of Religion and Empire* by the physician Ali Ibn Rabban Al-Tabari (838–870 CE). In the conclusion 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 ...? It will be said to him that some of its inhabitants belong to a religion (*din*) called Magianism.... Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called Zindikism.... Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called Christianity ... Some of its inhabitants belong to a religion called Judaism.... Some of its inhabitants belong to this pure and sublime religion called Islam ... In which of these religions and creeds would that Indian or that Chinese wish to believe ...” (Tabari 1922, 165–166). Al-Tabari classifies and compares cultural products that appear to him as pertaining to the same class of phenomena. Although he values them differently, he has a clear idea of their resemblance and translatability (Riesebrodt 2004, 132–133).

The reasons—theological, political, and intellectual—that lead a number of Arabo-Persian scholars of medieval times to register, analyze, and classify the religious communities of the surrounding world according to Islamic perspectives have been investigated several times (Lawrence 1976; Monnot 1986; 2010; Waardenburg 2003; Latief 2006). It has been also largely recognized that at least two of these Muslim literati, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048) and Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (1086–1153) revealed a genuine interest in understanding non-Islamic religions through comparison and demonstrated such skill in the investigation of other religions as to be considered forerunners if not founders of the comparative study of religions (see Stausberg, “History,” this volume). The relevance of the contribution of these medieval Muslim scholars to the historical and anthropological study of religion is enormous, notwithstanding a certain theological islamo-centric bias which shapes the modes of their classifications and evaluations of world religious traditions. It must also be noted that their approaches are different and complementary. Whereas al-Biruni focuses on the ritual practice, al-Shahrastani is more interested in the doctrinal variety of the religions and sects under examination (Al-Shahrastani 1986–1993). Thus they present different approaches to classifying world religions, but both make extensive and conscious usage of the comparative tool.

India

Political regulations through laws or edicts are, like theological competitions, informed by a referential concept of religion. Edicts seldom deal with one religion alone, but quite often regulate several religious groups and communities. The Indian king of the Maurya Dynasty Asoka (304–232 BCE) who ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent for almost forty years and converted gradually to Buddhism—regarding it as a doctrine that could serve as a cultural foundation for political unity without being a state religion—was perhaps the first sovereign to promulgate edicts of religious toleration that seem particularly relevant to current affairs. In the seventh rock edict we find a classification of groups (Buddhist, Jain, Brahman) compatible with the concept of (Indian) religions. Even more explicit is the twelfth edict:

King Priyadarsi, Beloved of the Gods, honors men of all religions (*pasanda*) with gifts and with honors of various kinds ... But the Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offering of gifts or the honoring of people so highly as the following, viz., that there should be a growth of the essential of Dharma among men of all religions. ... there should be no extolment of one's own religion or disparagement of other religions on inappropriate occasions ... On the contrary, other religions should be duly honored in every way on all occasions. If a person acts in this way, he not only promotes his own religion but also benefits other religions. But, if a person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own religion but also harms other religions. Truly, if a person extols his own religion and disparages other religions with a view to glorifying his religion owing merely to his attachment to it, he injures his own religion very severely by acting in that way. ... This indeed is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods that persons of all religions become well informed about the doctrines of different religions. (Translation based on Pugliese Carratelli 2003, 49 and 65)²

Thus we have here a very ancient and non-Western attestation of a usage of a term, *pasanda*, defining social institutions that have religious experts and laypeople and specific distinguishable worldviews, in other words religions, in a context that confers to the term a classificatory value (Haussig 1999, 120–122; Riesebrodt 2004, 143; Freiberger 2013, 33–37). Dharma, instead, very seldom evolved from the original meaning of 'cosmic-social order' referring exclusively to the indigenous religion of the Arya, to a comparative concept to be used for religion in general (Haussig 1999, 78–102).

After the Mughal conquest of India in the sixteenth century and the consequent partial Islamization, we find in Urdu an umbrella term for religion, namely the Persian *din*. We have evidence of this usage in the chronicles reporting the religious experiments at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (1542–1605 CE), which inter alia led to an increasingly clean-cut demarcation between politics and religion. In 1575, Akbar established a House of Worship in which theological and religious discussions

² Hultzsch (1925, 20–22) in a critical edition of the edicts, renders the term *pasanda* as 'sect,' a meaning that is in fact current in late Sanskrit but is not appropriate in this context.

took place every week. Originally only Islamic groups were admitted, including Sunni and Shi'a scholars, Sufi mystics, and others. Later, non-Muslim groups were included, such as Brahmans and even Jesuit missionaries and a Zoroastrian priest. Despite resistance by the exponents of Sunni orthodoxy, the emperor decided to establish a kind of 'interreligious council,' with the participation of the most illustrious representatives of every faith, among them Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. Akbar finally went so far as to found a new universalistic ethical religion (*Din-i Ilāhī*, "Religion of God"), implying a complete absence of a dogmatic theology and of specific forms of worship. This entails a kind of secularism and a distinct awareness of the pluralistic nature of religious traditions (Riesebrodt 2004, 141; King 2013).

China

In classical European histories of historiography (the situation is in part different in America: see Breisach 2005, 4026) one could hardly find the name of a pioneer of universal history like the Chinese historian of the Han dynasty Sima Qian (Suma Chien; c.145 BCE–86 BCE) who in his work *Shiji* ("Historical Records") set himself the task of describing in narrative terms everything of significance that had happened in the known world from the earliest mythological origins to the present day. Among the five sections of which the work consists, section three, the "Treatises," is of special concern for us. This section contains eight entries on such subjects as rituals, music, astronomy, and *religious sacrificial ceremonies* (including sacrifices to Heaven and Earth). This work of Sima Qian launches a historical tradition in China that already implies a principle of classification, including the category of religion, as a social segment. In another part of his encyclopaedia, Sima Qian went so far to devise even a taxonomy of these doctrinal, social, and political entities, introducing the notion of *liu-ja*, i.e. the 'six schools,' including the Yin-Yang Masters, the Confucians, the Mohists, the Logicians, the Legalists, and the Taoists (Denecke 2010, 53–54; Kleine 2013, 259–260).

The story of how the modern Chinese word for 'religion' *zongjiao* was first employed to mean religion in China during the first decade of the twentieth century (Yu 2005, 7; Meyer 2013, 361) under the influence of Japanese *shukyo* (first attested in Japanese in 1867, Kleine 2013, 258) provides an extremely instructive example of a translingual and transcultural process involving the translation and adaptation of the—originally Western but virtually universal in its irradiation—*notion of religion* into the Chinese specific context. *Zong-jiao* (like *shu-kyo*) is a compound consisting of *zong* (*shu*), a ~~pic~~ **logogram** ~~togram~~ which from the original meaning of 'ancestor,' 'basis,' evolves in Buddhist usage to indicate both a "particular divisional lineage of the religion" and "established dogma" (Yu 2005, 11), finally denoting a 'sect' or religious denomination, and *jiao* (*kyo*), meaning "teaching." Because of this association with both native religious practices and Buddhist doctrines, *zongjiao/shukyo* resulted in an apt umbrella term to designate a general concept of religion, including Christianity, in which both praxis and doctrine are essential elements.

But this standard narrative is partial and flawed by a Euro-centrism shared even by Chinese secular scholars, and it should be improved in various ways. Long before the adoption of the new term *zongjiao*, *jiao* itself (in general rendered as ‘doctrine’ or ‘tradition’) came closest, in usage, to the meaning of ‘religion.’ Since at least the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the standard rubric for classifying the religions of China was *san-jiao*, or the ‘three doctrines,’ referring to Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (Yu 2005, 13; Meyer 2013, 361). “Far from being a creation of alien traditions in modernity, *zongjiao* in its historical development had been itself fashioned by an alien religion [Buddhism] negotiating its way into China” (Yu 2005, 15).

Also, and most significantly, the term *jiao* was employed to refer to other foreign religious traditions including Nestorian Christianity (*Jingjiao*), Manichaeism (*Monijiao*), and Zoroastrianism (*Xianjiao*), that entered China in the Tang period (618–907 CE) (Yu 2005, 11–25; Deeg 2013, 213; Meyer 2013, 361; Tommasi 2014, 651, the latter based on a study of the Nestorian [Christian] Xi’an Stele [781 CE]). This is a remarkable example of cultural interaction and semantic interpenetration of theological concepts. Even earlier, the Manichaean *Hymnscroll* produced in Tang China when Manichaeism was introduced by the Uighurs in 768 CE testifies to a sinicization of the *Monijiao* (Mani religion), also denominated *Ming-jiao* (Religion of Light): *Ming* is in fact a Chinese character consisting of two ideograms for sun and moon (Yuanyuan/Wushu 2012, 235–236), a concept of Light which is absent in Manichaean Eastern sources. This *Hymnscroll* survived in spite of severe persecutions suffered by Manichaeans at the beginning of the Huichang era (840–846) of the Tang dynasty under Emperor Wuzong. Notwithstanding these persecutions, in Chinese documents of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) *Ming-jiao* is still attested as popular in present Fujian province, in addition to mainstream religions like Buddhism and Daoism.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to much of the recent social constructionist literature (for critiques, see Martin 2009, 143–152; Bergunder 2014), I have demonstrated on a rigorous historical basis that supposedly recent European words and concepts did not create and impose on non-European cultures new, extraneous, colonial configurations such as the separation of the sphere of religion from other spheres of human culture (politics, economy, etc.). That this separation was not ‘invented’ at all is implied by the universal process of construction of boundaries between distinct domains of social life and the consequent elaboration of cross-cultural categories. The possibility of *de-fining* and *trans-lating* religion into the most diverse historical and geographical milieus shows the panhuman character of this historical constellation. In conclusion, renouncing the chimera of a modern ‘Western’ Christian origin of this human reality (a claim of origin that implicitly involves a notion of guilt and a pretense of ownership and exclusivity: Bergunder

2014, 276) would result both in re-establishing the rights of history and in disposing of an ideologically charged politically divisive stereotype.

GLOSSARY

Category a class or group of things possessing some quality or qualities in common.

History history is midway between chronicle and legend.

Modernity the ensemble of particular sociocultural norms, attitudes, and practices that arose in post-medieval Eurasia and that have developed since, in various ways and at various times, around the world.

Religion a contract between humans and superhuman agents.

Tradition the transmission of cultural traits by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.

Translation a term for cultural processes that are profoundly dialogic and continuously 'carried across,' transformed and reinvented in practice.

Universal a pattern which is spread across all cultures.

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