



Nga rang gi chos khyod rang gi chos: “My Religion and Your Religion”? About Some Fundamental Issues in the Global History of Religion

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Abstract

This contribution outlines the project of a global history of religion that examines the historical formations and epistemic structures in non-European regions prior to the encounter with Europeans just as much as the current entanglements of the global discourse on religion. Based on a case study of the encounter between Tibetans and Catholic missionaries in 18th century Lhasa, three important aspects in the project of a global history of religion will be discussed: comparison, both at the subject level and as a scholarly method; the practice of translation; and finally the genealogical tracing of taxonomic orders in non-European regions beyond colonial orders. In addition, a suggestion is offered to expand our analytical repertoire to include non-European worlds of experience in a conceptual-historical approach.

Keywords

Tibet – Christian mission – comparison – translation practice – conceptual history

1 Introduction

In 1733, a handful of Capuchin monks, who had been trying to establish a mission station in central Tibet since 1707 but were very poorly funded by their

order and suffered from a shortage of money, finally decided to leave the country. Three Tibetan archival documents from 1732 and 1733,¹ commenting on the departure of the missionaries, provide an insight into the Tibetan attitude towards the foreigners. They attest that the monks always acted “for the benefit of all living beings” and complied with the religious and secular laws of the country. They behaved in a selfless and morally perfect manner and, in particular, provided their healing arts free of charge to the population. In one of the three documents, the Tibetan regent Pho lha nas (1689–1747), addressing the Capuchins, says the following remarkable sentence: “Although we do not know [your] doctrine (*chos*), we not only honour and respect all doctrines, ours and yours, but did not malign them in the past and do not do so now.”² I could also translate the sentence as, “Although we do not know [your] religion, we not only honour and respect all religions, ours and yours, but did not malign them before and do not do so now.” Or like this, “Although we do not know [your] dharma, we not only honour and respect all dharmas, ours and yours, but did not malign them before and do not do so now.”

This sentence and the various ways of translating it lead us right into two problems that lie at the heart of the project of a global history of religion, namely cultural translation and the question of the general concepts that are employed in the description of non-European lifeworlds. Both problems are also deeply related to the fundamental question of the role of comparison in a global history of religion. Using the encounter between Tibetans and Christian missionaries in Tibet in the 18th century as an example, I will discuss these three fundamental aspects. Before that, however, I will briefly outline the project of a global history of religion as it has been developed in recent years by a number of scholars, including myself.

2 The Concept of a Global History of Religion

The global history of religion has so far been primarily a project of German-language religious studies.³ The approach takes important inspirations from global history, which has been popular for several decades, and like global

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- 1 The Tibetan texts are given in Petech, *I Missionari*, IV, pp. 196–204; Engelhardt, *Between Tolerance*, pp. 71–73.
 - 2 Tib. *nged nas chos mi shes kyang/ nga rang gi chos khyod rang gi chos thams cad la dad pa dang mos gus byed pa ma gtoḡs/ bkur 'debs sngar yang ma byas/ da yang mi byed/*, see Petech, *I Missionari*, IV, p. 197.
 - 3 Recently, however, efforts have been made to introduce the concept in Anglophone research as well, see Maltese/Strube, *Special issue: Global Religious History*.

history it also struggles with similar epistemological and conceptual difficulties. That applies to the general concepts used, originating from the European particularist analytical vocabulary, the understanding of “global”, and the comparability inscribed in the project of a global history of religion. It is important to note that no homogeneous concept of a global history of religion exists, but that different concepts and approaches are negotiated under the labels global religious history and global history of religion respectively. This diversity of approaches has proven to be very fruitful for the debate. What all concepts of a global history of religion have in common is that they do not assign an exclusively European genealogy to the analytical terms used globally today, such as “religion”, but rather acknowledge their interconnected genesis. That signifies the final farewell to “regionalized origin thinking”.⁴ Furthermore, arguably all current approaches to global history of religion agree with the general thrust formulated by Michael Bergunder that their “theoretical repertoire is largely informed by a critical engagement with postcolonial perspectives, while its historiographical method is genealogical”.⁵ However, there are different views on the understanding of globality and postcolonialism underlying such a history of religion. Many scholars understand “global” in terms of a progressive interconnectedness of European, predominantly Protestant orders of knowledge with non-European orders of knowledge in the wake of Western European colonization and imperial order, leading to an emerging shared perception and interpretation of the world. Such an understanding lends itself naturally to a temporal focus on the 19th century and an emphasis on British-style colonialism. Against this backdrop, I argue in favor of a global history of religion that also covers the genealogy of non-European knowledge formations prior to the encounter with Europe, drawing on orders of discourse in the languages of the respective regions.⁶ The translation practices necessary to this endeavour not only lead to the questioning of a postcolonialism oriented exclusively to the British Empire and India but also break down the presupposition of a homogeneous Protestant-influenced global understanding of religion.⁷

I take my concept of a global history of religion more in terms of a research perspective.⁸ “Global” in this perspective refers first to the spatial context, and secondly to the taxonomic orders by which reality is accessed. First, a global history of religion focuses neither on nation states as spatial units nor on the

4 In the original German: “regionalisiertes Ursprungsdenken,” see Bergunder, *Umkämpfte Historisierung*, p. 56.

5 Strube, *Global Tantra*, p. 16.

6 For example, Kleine, *The Secular Ground Bass*; Kollmar-Paulenz, *Lamas und Schamanen*.

7 Schlieter, *Four conjectures*, pp. 126–127.

8 On this approach see also Kollmar-Paulenz, *Of Yellow Teaching*, in particular p. 234.

“one” world in its totality, but on different world regions. Europe is only one among its many geographical nodes with which it engages in micro-historical studies. Secondly, this implies that a global history of religion does not limit itself to the diffusion history of European taxonomies into other parts of the world, nor to their mutual interconnections. On the contrary: the abandonment of the fixation on Europe as the centre of historical events carries with it an open time horizon with respect to its objects of investigation. The 19th century cannot be the starting point of a thus conceived global history of religion. On the basis of the encounter between Christian monks and Tibetan rulers I will now outline and discuss this specific research perspective.

3 Categorizing the Christian Doctrine: A Case Study from Eighteenth Century Tibet

The Catholic missions in Lhasa began in 1707, when a small group of Capuchin friars reached the Tibetan capital. They lasted, interrupted repeatedly by longer absences of the padres, until 1745, when the last of them left Tibet, and were characterized by an often desperate financial situation of the Capuchins, tensions between them and the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), recurring health problems, and not least probably also loneliness, since sometimes only two padres were still present on site. At the beginning, the friars were warmly received. In their letters and reports they describe the ruler Lhazang Khan (a Qoshot Mongol) as an interested and open-minded interlocutor who found the religion of the Capuchins, called “white-headed lamas” by the Tibetans, “good”. The initially positive attitude towards the foreigners was also due to the fact that the Tibetans quickly came to appreciate the medical knowledge of the padres and the free medical care they offered. Early on, the padres were given residence rights in Lhasa as well as the right to practice their own “doctrines” (Tib. *chos*) and to wear their habit in public. Lhazang Khan and the Tibetan nobility also showed great interest in scientific and technical news, mathematics and astronomy, mechanical clocks, etc. Tibet had long been aware of the superior mathematical and astronomical knowledge of the Jesuits, who had been staying in Beijing since the late Ming period and served the Chinese rulers in various capacities. A number of Jesuit astronomical and mathematical works were translated from Chinese into Mongolian and Tibetan, at the beginning of the 18th century.⁹ Intellectual curiosity about new astronomical and mathematical knowledge fell on fertile ground because in 18th century Tibet,

9 Van der Kuijp, *From Chongzhen lishu; Yongdan, The Translation*.

the study of secular fields of knowledge like grammar, mathematics, or astronomy/astrology was equally important in both monastic and secular contexts.

The open reception on the part of the secular government was contrasted by the hesitant reception on the part of the monastic establishment about whose reasons we can only speculate. Some monasteries flatly refused the padres' request to study the Tibetan language with them. Only after an intervention by the ruler were the Capuchin friar Orazio della Penna (1680–1745) and the Jesuit Desideri finally allowed to study at Sera Monastery. Desideri reports that some monks attended the holy mass that he and della Penna held at the monastery.¹⁰ Della Penna was also able to read the catechism, after translating it into Tibetan, during a meeting at Sera Monastery. The Catechism circulated in some monasteries, certainly met with interest, and was controversially discussed, especially with regard to the doctrine of rebirth, which was missing in Christianity.

Tibetan legal documents give us interesting clues about the conceptual placement of the strangers and their teachings within Tibet's own knowledge culture.¹¹ Here and in the 1733 court document I already quoted, the teachings of the strangers are referred to as *chos*. The Tibetan term *chos* has a great semantic breadth. It can refer, depending on the historical context,¹² to (1) philosophical doctrinal systems or even individual doctrinal teachings; (2) the Buddhist *dharma*, i.e., Buddhist teachings; (3) "doctrinal traditions" in the sense of social communities or groups that follow specific doctrines or practices; and (4) in the word compositions *lha chos* and *mi chos*, moral and legal rules that relate to either the religious or the secular realm (which are treated separately).¹³ *Chos*¹⁴ thus encompasses a domain of order that emphasizes, on the one hand, religious-philosophical doctrinal systems and, on the other, moral rules of order. In our specific legal context here, *chos* is used in the sense of social communities that follow distinctive doctrinal traditions. The

10 Desideri, *Mission to Tibet*, p. 45.

11 See the two edicts by the regent Pho lha nas and the VII Dalai Lama, both from 1741. The Tibetan text with a tentative German translation is provided in Lindegger (ed.), *Dokumente.*, pp. 7–12.

12 The historical context includes both micro- and macro-historical levels that must be contextualized synchronously. Thus, it must be carefully explored what meaning the term *chos* had in a local or regional setting at a particular time. That may well turn out to be different from the macro-historical level, e.g., in a cross-regional jurisdiction such as the Tibetan Law Code of 1583, see Meisezahl, *Die Handschriften*.

13 Roesler, *Die Lehre*, pp. 134–141.

14 Or its variant *chos lugs*, see for example the chronicle dBa' bzhed [The testimony of the dBa'] (12th c.?), fol. 2v1, in Wangdu/Diemberger, *dBa' bzhed*, p. 127.

term was used in a comparative way early on, at least since the 12th century.¹⁵ In the 18th century, *chos* and its variant *chos lugs* had long since established itself as a comparative term in intellectual debates. Thus, the Third Panchen Lama (1735–1780) reports on the British attitude towards different religious communities in his famous work *The Way to Shambhala*: “They respect whatever religious system (*chos lugs*), be it Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim, and appear to treat them fairly according to a law of secular character.”¹⁶ Similarly, the Mongolian polymath Gombojab (ca. 1692–ca. 1750), in his *Religious History of China* written in Tibetan, not only discusses Chinese religions at length, but also devotes a short section to Christianity, which he had become acquainted with from the Jesuits who stayed in Beijing at the court of the Qianlong emperor.¹⁷ He describes all these religions in terms of *chos* and *chos lugs*.

All proponents of a global history of religion are probably in agreement that its methodological procedure should be genealogical. This entails that the present categories we use in the analysis do not have stable meanings reaching back into history. However, I do not limit myself in the application of the genealogical method to the 19th century, as does Michael Bergunder, for example.¹⁸ Instead, I argue for an end to “temporalized origins thinking”, as Christoph Kleine aptly calls it in his contribution to the present volume and advocate the careful study of the historical semantics of non-European analytical conceptualizations, as I will elaborate below. Today, the Tibetan term *chos* serves as a translation of the English *religion*.¹⁹ This enables me to relate the Tibetan term to the Anglo-European term “religion” and then follow its genealogy into the historical past, continually charting its changing meanings through careful contextualization. At the same time, we must ask what terms the Italian missionaries used to frame their experiences. The term “religion”

15 dBa' bzhed, fol. 9v5 (Wangdu/Diemberger, *dBa' bzhed*, p. 134): *dmu stegs kyi chos*, the “heretical teaching.” Wangdu/Diemberger, *dBa' bzhed*, p. 50, translate “the non-Buddhist religion.”

16 Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, *Shambha la'i rnam bshad*, fol. 27r: *di mams nang pa dang mu stegs byed dang/ kla klo sogs kyi chos lugs gang la'ang mos pa byed cing jig rten lugs kyi khirms drang por spyod pa zhiq yin par snang/*.

17 Gombojab, *rGya nag chos 'byung*, pp. 67–68. For a discussion of the relevant passages see Sweet, *Jesus the World Protector*, pp. 174–175.

18 Bergunder, *Hinduism*, p. 88; Bergunder, *Comparison*, p. 46.

19 bKra shis tshe ring, *English-Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*, p. 841, s.v. religion; Goldstein/Narkyid, *English-Tibetan Dictionary*, p. 361, s.v. religion, and religious sect; Goldstein, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 405, s.v. *chos*, and p. 407, s.v. *chos lugs*. For German, compare Losang Tenzin Mantö, *Deutsch-tibetisches Wörterbuch*, p. 417, s.v. *chos lugs*.

rarely appears in their reports regarding Tibet.²⁰ Instead, the Italian missionaries use the word *legge* and *lex*, respectively. According to Dorothea Weltecke, in the Middle Ages that word “in a religious context could designate the divine statute and thus the order of the human community”, i.e. the religious order in which the relationship to God took place.²¹ The term *lex* was used comparatively for Christians, Saracens, and Buddhists as early as the 13th century by Wilhelm von Rubruk in his travelogue about the Mongols.²² With regard to the Christian-Buddhist religious encounter in 18th century Tibet, we possess, in the writings of Desideri, an important contemporary source that attests to the use of terminology at that time and confirms the comparative use of *lex* respectively *legge*.²³ Desideri is famous for his philosophical treatises in the Tibetan language with which he tried to win the Buddhist monks for Christianity. In Tibetan, Desideri uses *chos lugs*.²⁴ Under this umbrella term, he compares the “doctrinal system of Tibet” with the “doctrinal system of the others” (*gzhan gyi chos lugs*), as he persistently calls Christianity, and treats basic Buddhist concepts such as karma, rebirth, or the doctrine of non-self. However, the vocabulary he uses, which unfolds the semantic realm of “religion” in 18th century Central Tibetan understanding, did not emerge in the 18th century as a reaction or a cultural mimesis²⁵ to corresponding Christian discourses, but looks back to a centuries-old tradition. Desideri explicitly points this out:

You should also be aware that Tibetans have their own dialectics, terms, definitions, divisions of the argument [...]. They have a way of raising and resolving problems that is the same as ours, their procedure being to propose the point at issue, state the opinions of others upon it, refute them, state one's own solution adducing the arguments in its favor, and finally to answer the objections of one's opponents. These methods are

20 The Latin version of Desideri's opus magnum *Inquiry concerning the doctrines of previous lives and emptiness, offered to the scholars of Tibet by the star head lama called Ippolito* (*mGo skar gyi bla ma i po li do zhes bya ba yis phul ba'i bod kyi mkhas pa rnam la skye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba'i sgo nas zhu ba*) in one place uses *religio* in the sense of faith, see Lopez Jr./Jinpa, *Dispelling the Darkness*, p. 275.

21 Weltecke, *Über Religion*, p. 26.

22 Wilhelm von Rubruk, *Sinica Franciscana*, p. 292; compare also Weltecke, *Über Religion*, p. 23.

23 In his Italian letters he uses *legge*, for an example see Pomplun, *Natural Reason*, p. 389, note 15. For a general discussion of the terminology employed by the missionaries and their historical contextualization see Pomplun, *Like No Other*, pp. 547–548. Desideri's letters have been published in the last three volumes of Petech's monumental *I missionaries*.

24 Lopez Jr./Jinpa, *Dispelling the Darkness*, p. 151.

25 Hallisey, *Roads Taken*.

not only to be found in their books but are vigorously and indefatigably practiced.²⁶

With regard to the encounter and interaction between Tibetan and Catholic missionaries, three interrelated issues relevant to the project of global history of religion come to the fore: First, comparison both on the epistemological level and on the subject level underlies the project of global history of religion. It must be critically examined with regard to the unequal power relations inscribed in it and the situatedness of the comparing subject. Secondly, comparison constitutes itself in the translation practices I employ, which open up a space for the transformation, reconfiguration, and even invention of new meanings and modes of representation. Thirdly, our case study exemplifies that the constitution of taxonomic orders can be traced far beyond the 19th century. However, the investigation of these historical path dependencies rests on the linguistic competence of the researcher.

3.1 *The Politics of Comparison*

My case study presented above contains a tacit comparison on account of my translation of Tibetan *chos* as “religion”. By the translation I implicitly assume that a concept comparable to today’s concept of “religion” existed in 18th century Tibet. Moreover, the use of the modern concept of religion for Tibetan *chos* (as used in 18th century Tibet) establishes a diachronic relationship between the two concepts without my rendering this explicit.²⁷ In view of such asymmetries, it is not surprising that comparison in cultural and religious studies has been the subject of much discussion and remains one of its most controversial operations to this day.²⁸ In the operation of comparison, the *tertium comparationis* is of crucial importance. It is determinative, because its choice presupposes that the two *comparata* are assumed to have a sameness to which I can apply the tertium. However, the tertium does not arise by itself. Its choice implies a certain interest in making this comparison. Thus it depends on the comparing actor and his or her perspective on things. Further, it is also dependent on contexts and purposes of comparison that are often not made explicit. In relation to the scholarly operation of comparison, its partiality strikes me as a major challenge for the project of a global history of religion. Due to the decontextualization of *comparata* that accompanies the practice and the new

26 Desideri, *Mission to Tibet*, p. 189.

27 Kollmar-Paulenz, *Aussereuropäische Religionsbegriffe*, p. 83.

28 See, for example, Matthes, *The Operation*; Stausberg, *Comparison*; Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*.

contextualization or re-contextualization, comparisons are “never neutral: they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive”, as the literary scholar Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan asserts.²⁹ Comparison is an “instrument of domination”, as in its supposed scholarly “neutrality” unspoken mechanisms of domination are inscribed.³⁰ Specifically related to my Tibetan case study, I need to reflect on the motivations of my comparative translation, and this includes the intrinsic power structure that determines my choice of words. Furthermore, I need to confront the question which historical subject compares and why does it compare? Because in comparisons the comparative actor and her or his situational context are arguably the most crucial, the historian Angelika Epple has proposed to transform the triadic relation of comparison into a tetrad consisting of the two comparata, the tertium and the situational context within which the comparative actor is situated. Thus, it is not comparison itself, but the practice of comparison, the *doing comparisons*, that is at the centre of interest.³¹

However, my case study not only highlights the scholarly comparison, but also contains a Tibetan example of a comparative operation: The Tibetan classification of the Capuchin teachings in the same taxonomic order as their own Buddhist teachings is built on a comparison. What is the reference point of the comparison that the Tibetans made with the categorization of Christian teachings as *chos*? The documents quoted at the beginning provide us with a glimpse. They specify that the Capuchins acted “for the benefit of all living beings”, a statement that is also repeated in the 1741 decree of the regent Pho lha nas, in which he grants the Capuchins freedom to proselytize.³² This decree also states that they teach people to accomplish the deeds of the true Buddhas and lead them on the true path of the Sukhāvātī.³³ Thus, the “third of comparison”³⁴ is the process of spiritual development, which received its systematic formulation in the Tibetan literary genre of doxography, the “presentation of tenets” (Tib. *grub mtha'i rnam bzhag*).³⁵ In the eyes of the Buddhist studies scholar Roger Jackson, this genre “demonstrates that the idea of “comparative religion” is not a solely Western invention.”³⁶ Returning to our

29 Radhakrishnan, *Why compare?*, p. 454.

30 Epple/ Erhart, *Die Welt beobachten*, p. 15.

31 Epple, *Doing Comparisons*, p. 163.

32 Lindegger, *Dokumente*, p. 7.

33 Lindegger, *Dokumente*, p. 7: *bden pa'i sangs rgyas kyi bya ba byed pa'i bslabs par dang/ bde ba chen po'i bden pa'i lam la bkri ba dang/*.

34 Freiburger, *Der Vergleich*, p. 200.

35 The comparison in the doxographies is nearly always normatively determined.

36 Jackson, *Editor's Introduction*, p. 15; see also Hopkins, *The Tibetan Genre*.

18th century Tibetan source, the *tertium comparationis* in Buddhist terms is to help living beings on their way to liberation. Here, the comparison serves the affirmation of the existing Buddhist order through the insertion of new facts. My perspective on the global history of religion entails that we pay attention to such knowledge formations that have emerged independently from Europe as well, in our case in close interaction and intertwining with Indian knowledge cultures.³⁷

Comparison as a scholarly operation requires us to constantly reflect on how the preparatory stages of comparative inquiry influence and shape our objects of research. The question of such reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the subject of research is of particular importance when the researcher is forced to work with a language or concepts in which she or he has not been socialized. In that case there is in fact from the outset an asymmetry in the relations between the researcher and the research field. This and the problems addressed earlier leads me to the question of cultural translation.

3.2 *Translation Practices*

The comparison of European and Tibetan conceptualizations is constituted in the practice of translation. Scholars of religion who are also philologists are usually well aware that the idea of linguistic equivalence between two languages, which has contributed to an understanding of translation as an “exchange of equivalent meanings”, is not much more than an invention, obscuring, moreover, the fact that translations are representations in which asymmetrical power relations are inscribed. In relation to the practice of translation, Christian Meyer and Adrian Hermann have brought into play the concept of translingual practice of literary scholar Lydia Liu to reflect on the role of translation for the global history of religion.³⁸ Liu advises us to follow “words-in-motion,” that is, “the invention of new meanings as words travel.”³⁹ She defines translingual practice as

the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of, the latter’s contact/ collision with the guest language. Meanings, therefore, are not so much “transformed” when

37 Indian precursors (and models) were texts like the *Tattvasaṃgrahakārikā* by Śāntarakṣita (8th c.), see Hopkins, *The Tibetan Genre*, p. 173. On Indian compendia comparing world-views, see Schlieter, *The Indian Origins*.

38 Meyer, *Der moderne chinesische Religionsbegriff*, pp. 352–355; Hermann, *Unterscheidungen*.

39 Tsing, *Worlds*, p. 15.

concepts pass from the guest language to the host language as invented within the local environment of the latter.⁴⁰

Liu emphasizes that translation is therefore by no means unaffected by political or ideological struggles but is often their actual battle ground.

The notion of translanguing practice also considers the translator, who assumes an important role as an active and creative agent. Translators do not just pick out equivalents between languages, they actively invent them, and thus contribute to the transformation of the languages they work with. This becomes particularly clear when we abandon the usual Anglo-American theoretical model of translation, which proceeds from the assumption of monolingualism and builds on an understanding of translators as mediators between two linguistic groups.⁴¹ If we take a broader perspective and include practices such as translation committees consisting of different translators, as was the case in Qing-era China (1644–1912) in the large multilingual dictionary projects, it becomes obvious that these translators invented and negotiated translation terms between two or more languages. To give just one example: the terms entered in the Tibetan-Mongolian terminological dictionary *Dag yig mkhas pa'i 'byung gnas/ Merged yarqu-yin oron* (“A lexical resource for the learned”) compiled by a translation committee headed by the second lCang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje (1717–1786) from 1741 to 1742 were the result of ongoing negotiation processes.⁴²

The concept of translanguing practice does not exempt scholars of the global history of religion from the language competence of the linguistic spaces under study. As the Chinese studies scholar Robert Ford Campany points out in his critique of Tomoko Masuzawa’s monograph about the construction of “world religions”:

if you want to argue that Westerners got important things wrong about the Others, that they created a concept based on their own preoccupations and assumptions and then just projected it onto other societies and periods, [...] then it seems to me you are obliged to move off the pages of Western tomes and into those of other worlds and times, and their linguistically challenging texts.⁴³

40 Liu, *Translingual Practice*, p. 26.

41 For a critical assessment, see Tymoczko, *Reconceptualizing Translation Theory*, pp. 16 et seq.

42 Rol pa'i rdo rje discusses his theoretical approach to translation issues in the foreword to the dictionary (*Dag yig*, fols. 3v–23v).

43 Campany, “*Religion*”, p. 339.

And the historian of Southern Asia, Margrit Pernau reminds us that the professional study of the history of non-European regions “needs over wide stretches not only knowledge of the languages of the colonial powers, but also of the local languages, if it wants to avoid reproducing the colonial view [...]”⁴⁴ and not become the “precursor of a new form of academic colonialism.”⁴⁵ Clearly, language competence, and specifically competence in so-called vernacular languages, plays a crucial role not only for scholars interested in historical entanglements outside Europe prior to European expansion, but also for those whose point of departure is the 19th century and who examine Europe’s encounters and entanglements with the “rest of the world”. By tracing concepts back in time in their respective languages and examining their contested historical semantics, we give them back their history and begin to address the “asymmetrical ignorance” in regard of theory production that Dipesh Chakrabarty notes.⁴⁶

3.3 *Taxonomical Orders beyond the 19th Century*

Most scholars committed to a global history of religion take their starting point in the 19th century. This is probably the hypothesis within the different conceptualisations of a global history of religion where opinions differ the most. The focus on the 19th century is reasoned by the genealogical method used in the global history of religion. Repeating Michael Bergunder’s argument,⁴⁷ Julian Strube emphasizes that “precolonial” can “only denote the time directly before the nineteenth century, rather than vaguely indicating thousand-year-old Indian traditions, the continuity of which is often simply presupposed.”⁴⁸ I admit that this reasoning completely eludes me. Why does a historical investigation undertaken beyond the 19th century imply that I am ahistorically assuming fixed thousand year old Indian traditions? If I take a genealogical approach, I can trace historical developments far into the past if I have the historical sources to do so. In a micro-historical approach, as a matter of course I contextualise my findings, carefully following individual developments and documenting ruptures and fissures. Referring to my case study, I have already mentioned that the Tibetan term *chos* can be traced back to at least the 12th century, in a range of connotations, shaped by varying local, regional, and trans-regional historical contexts. However we translate the term does not change

44 Pernau, *Global history*.

45 Conrad, *Globalgeschichte*, p. 91.

46 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 28 et seq.

47 Bergunder, *Hinduism*, pp. 88 et seq.

48 Strube, *Global Tantra*, pp. 16 et seq.

the fact that already in 12th century Tibet parts of reality were selected and assigned to a classification concept that helped to make the world accessible. With it we have a Tibetan concept of order, which represents a category of collective perception of reality, which would not exist in this way without the term and the concepts associated with it. This observation is important for the concept of a global history of religion, which has made the investigation of the history of non-European taxonomic orders one of its goals.

The study of non-European knowledge orders before European expansion in their respective regional and local contexts, but also in their global interconnections is an important concern of mine for other reasons as well. Doris Bachmann-Medick has pointed out that postcolonial studies is primarily oriented toward Indian subaltern studies, and the theoretical models of postcolonialism are centred on India and the British Empire.⁴⁹ Postcolonialism in this configuration, written in English, has become the hegemonic international discourse. Research on other colonial experiences, such as those in Latin America or former Tsarist Russia,⁵⁰ are rarely considered in the discussion. Furthermore, it is also worth taking a critical stance towards the postcolonial narrative that a homogeneous,⁵¹ often Protestant-configured concept of religion has triumphed globally. This narrative tends to ignore the life worlds and experiences of other world regions in which the Protestant concept of religion has played no or only a subordinate role. And lastly, English as the dominant medium of research leads to the exclusion of studies in other languages. For example, the Latin American scholar Daniel Mato points out that cultural studies written in Spanish always come second to studies in English.⁵² Such linguistic asymmetries reinforce the implicit assumption that Anglo-American theories and concepts have the highest scientific authority. The sidelining of non-English discourses in the international debate has had a fundamental impact on the formation of theory in cultural studies and, by extension, in religious studies. A global history of religion should challenge this linguistic asymmetry and the resulting hegemonial discourse.

49 Bachmann-Medick, *The Trans/National Study*, p. 12.

50 Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*; Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*.

51 On this assumption, see Kleine, *Wozu aussereuropäische Religionsgeschichte?*, p. 9. The homogenizing tendencies can be countered by a critical examination of "religion" as a "word-in-motion," see Gluck, *Words*.

52 Mato, *Latin American Intellectual Practices*, p. 791, quoted after Bachmann-Medick, *The Trans/National Study*, p. 12.

4 Integrating Non-European Concepts into a Global History of Religion

Although conceptual history has so far been critically received in the context of the project of a global history of religion,⁵³ the outline of a global conceptual history forms an integral part of my own global history of religion approach. It is precisely the focus on the practice of translation that enables me to write the entangled history of global encounters also as a history of entangled concepts. Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier have highlighted the fact that almost all global encounters “occur not only across geographical but also linguistic boundaries and hence involve the necessity for a translation of words and concepts [...]”⁵⁴ I explicitly do not understand conceptual history in the conventional sense as the history of concepts as entities independent of their social and communicative setting that are to be examined in terms of their genesis and changes in meaning. A conceptual history in this narrow sense is usually based on the evaluation of textual references that have been removed from their original communicative context. From my point of view, this is a strongly reductionist view of the conceptual-historical project.⁵⁵ Concepts are shaped through socially situated communication, determined by mutual (mis)understanding against the backdrop of power relations. A conceptual history anchored in communication places the agents in their historical and social situatedness at the centre of investigation. Through linguistically but also visually encoded concepts,⁵⁶ they give meaning to their experiences and generate knowledge of the world. A global conceptual history thus requires an approach of “conceptual intermediality” in the sense of a “multidimensional semantic net, the threads of which are woven through different media, sign systems, discourses and temporal layers of meaning.”⁵⁷

To what extent can the global history of religion benefit from the inclusion of a history of concepts as outlined above? One of the most pertinent questions in this regard is how counter-narratives to the dominant narratives can be written that map non-European worlds of experience borne of their own respective perceptions of the world, without already being pre-structured and appropriated by our conceptual terminology. If we do not want to abandon the use of a common scientific language from the outset, we need to explore

53 Bergunder, *Was ist Religion?*, pp. 24–28.

54 Pernau/Sachsenmaier, *History of Concepts*, p. 2.

55 Koselleck, *Sprachwandel*; compare also Busse, *Conceptual History*, pp. 112–114.

56 On the inclusion of visual media in a study of histories of concepts, see Rajamani, *Pictures*.

57 Rajamani, *Pictures*, p. 330.

whether there is a possibility to develop transculturally applicable analytical concepts that include different worlds of experience beyond the privileged taxonomies of Anglo-American knowledge cultures. Margrit Pernau has recently outlined a three-step way in which such an endeavour may succeed: The first step is to use the analytical vocabulary common in the humanities and social sciences, which is inevitably a European vocabulary, with all the limitations this implies for application to non-European contexts. Discrepancies and fault lines will rapidly open up between the empirical material and the concepts one uses to analyse and describe it. In a second step, the conceptual history of our own analytical categories is examined. This leads to a breaking down of the supposed homogeneity of European conceptualisations since they are usually applied differently in the various European languages. In this second step we can likewise integrate the genealogical investigation of possible structural equivalents in non-European life-worlds situated in their respective communicative contexts. It goes without saying that the non-European taxonomies, just like their European counterparts, are shaped by power constellations or even their own colonialist patterns in their respective historical contexts, which need to be identified. Once these taxonomies are identified, the tedious and lengthy work of the third step begins, namely the transformation and reconfiguration of existing Eurocentric concepts through the integration of non-European experiences configured in their own taxonomies. Our European conceptualisations are thus adapted and modified by the inclusion of non-European worlds of experience. This third step not only correlates with the concept of translanguaging practice described above, but actively and consciously utilizes it. I am well aware that we will be dealing with a very long process here.

5 Conclusion

The project of a global history of religion outlined here insists on a historical in-depth dimension beyond the 19th century, because it has set itself the task of examining the knowledge orders of non-European life worlds in their translocal and transregional relations to the same extent as the manifold interconnections between European and non-European worlds that shape our global world today. Furthermore, it pursues the goal of de-Europeanizing our conceptual toolkit. To this end, I have proposed the development of a global conceptual history in which we exploit the fact that concepts adopted from European languages have acquired new meanings and been reconfigured in the various linguistic parts of the world from the very first encounter situation.

We ought to learn from these experiences and leave behind the dominance of the monolingual English-speaking world to reach out to other linguistic worlds, seeking to integrate the many non-European worlds of experience that are still foreign to us.

Biography

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