Seeing Through One: Kollmar-Paulenz's Contributions to the Mongolian and Global Study of Religion(s)

Piotr Sobkowiak

29/01/2024

Abstract

The paper discusses the works by Professor Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz on Mongolian shamanism and Buddhism, embedded within the concept of a global history of religion. Contextualised within the debate on the existence of emic terms for "religion" outside of European epistemological traditions, the paper examines the disputes that Kollmar-Paulenz's approach has engendered among scholars engaged in post-structural paradigms and presents an argument for their theoretical reconsideration.

> " The obstinacy with which the particularity, and at the same time the incomparability, of cultures is asserted in postcolonial discourse is astonishing. The implications of such culturally relativistic obstinacy are grave. Contrary to the claim that Asian cultures should no longer be described in terms of deficiency but should be taken seriously in their culture-specific singularity, the postcolonial discourse moves straight towards a renewed confirmation of the exclusivity of European intellectual history. The development of an intellectual terminology remains Europe's achievement. (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 17–18)[1]

Lamas and Shamans belongs to a series of papers (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007; 2008; 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; 2013; 2014; 2017) spanning a decade of Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's research on the history of the emic discourse on two Mongolian religious traditions—Buddhism and Shamanism. My commentary is therefore placed in the context of her other papers relating to the same topic. This contextualisation crucially clarifies that "Lamas and Shamans" is neither a single paper nor the final outcome of her works on the topic.

---

[1] "Die Hartnäckigkeit, mit der im postkolonialen Diskurs die Partikularität und zugleich die Unvergleichbarkeit der Kulturen behauptet wird, erstaunt. Die Implikationen solch kulturrelativistischer Hartnäckigkeit sind schwerwiegend. Entgegen dem Anspruch, asiatische Kulturen nicht mehr in Defizienzkategorien zu beschreiben, sondern in ihrer kulturspezifischen Singularität ernst zu nehmen, führt der postkoloniale Diskurs geradewegs zu einer erneuten Bestätigung des europäischen geistesgeschichtlichen Sonderwegs. Die Herausbildung einer reflexiven Terminologie bleibt die Errungenschaft Europas" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 17–18).

The paper presented in English translation in this special issue was published in German[2] in the collected volume *Religion in Asien?* (Schalk et al. 2013). In this work, scholars specialising in the Asian history of religion(s) ask whether it is possible to prove that semantic and functional equivalents of the term "religion" existed in pre-modern Asian history (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 15; 2013: 162). This stance was to challenge the claim that before the colonial encounters between the "West" and the "Rest," the Asian cultures, albeit having produced a vast range of religious texts, had not developed any term that could be translated as "religion" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013: 2024: 7–9; 152–154). Approaching this problem, Kollmar-Paulenz noticed that first of all, the claims that Asian languages had no term(s) corresponding to "religion" was often made by authors who do not have the necessary philological competence and mostly work in the field of European history of religions (2007: 2). She also observed that "the few religious studies works that examine non-European analytical terminologies often lack historicization and contextualisation" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 11, FN 20; 2013: 157, FN 20).

In tune with the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), Kollmar-Paulenz advocated for research into the Mongolian and Tibetan intellectual traditions early in her works on Mongolian religion(s) (2007: 16). She later called it "the most urgent methodological desiderium of a study of religion that claims a global scope for its subject matter" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 10–11; 2013: 157). The philologically based methodology Kollmar-Paulenz employed is theoretically anchored in the post-structural socio-linguistic theories that frame the discursive study of religion(s) as it is practised nowadays.

Applying her profound knowledge of classical languages—Mongolian, Tibetan, and Sanskrit—Kollmar-Paulenz conducted an in-depth philological analysis of a wide range of texts that cover over four hundred years of Tibetan and Mongolian textual traditions. She first focused on the umbrella terms (*Oberbegriffe*) which, by bundling together other concepts (practises, rituals, ideas, concepts, and persons), differentiate and organise them in a distinct area of knowledge (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 7–8; 2013: 151). In the Mongolian language, she identifies two such terms: *nom* and *šasin*. She explains that *šasin* is a borrowing from Sanskrit and historically refers to teachings of the Buddha as introduced to the Mongols by the Tibetan monks, especially those of the *dGe lugs pa* school (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 15–16; 2013: 163). She also notes that the meaning of *šasin* shows similarities with *religio* in the Christian Late Antiquity (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 16). *Nom*, in turn, is also a borrowing; it came into the Mongolian language, through Sogdian, from Greek (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 15–16; 2013: 163). Kollmar-Paulenz explains that *šasin* and *nom*, first, translate Tibetan terms (Tib. *bstan pa* and *chos*), second, were used as self-identification markers for Buddhism in Mongolia and, third, were applied in comparisons, as in the oppositions "yellow religion" (Mn. *sir-a šasin*; i.e., Buddhism) and "black religion" (Mn. *qar-a šasin*; i.e. Shamanism) (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 15).

---

[2] Whenever philologically reasoned, I refer to the German original (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013).

Moving to terms that can also be translated as "religion" but etymologically refer to body-related practises, Kollmar-Paulenz deconstructs the term *mörgöl*, which denotes the act of bowing (2024: 21–22; 2013: 171–172). She draws attention to the shift in meaning of Mongolian terms from the religio-philosophical domain, as in *šasin*, to religio-pragmatic one, as in *mörgöl*. Discussing the Mongolian term *üjel*—"view" or "views"—which denotes the act of seeing, she relates it to "the actors and their performance, as well as their emotional and intellectual responses to seeing and being seen" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012c: 12). The "wrong views" (Mn. *buruyu üjel*) of the Mongolian shamans, in turn, denotes polemics against religious outsiders and their non-Buddhist world-view (*Weltsicht*) (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 13). Furthermore, Kollmar-Paulenz analyses the Buddhists' inclusion-exclusion and derogatory terminology for naming shamans (2024: 18–22; 2013: 167–171).

Embedding her research in Bourdieu's field theory (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012c: 8), Kollmar-Paulenz explores the missionary strategies of Buddhist monks in Mongolia between the 17th and 19th centuries. Framed in this way, the history of Mongolian religion(s) appears interwoven with questions of political power and social status. Investigating the history of the dissemination of Buddhism in Mongolia, Kollmar-Paulenz points to its legislative implications reflected in the local laws: the ban of animal sacrifices, the confiscation and burning of representations of ancestral and shamans' helping spirits (Mn. *ongyod*) (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012b: 240), the financial penalties for employing shamans, and the orders permitting their public humiliation (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 13–14; 2013: 160). On the other hand, Kollmar-Paulenz discusses the gratifications for those who memorised Buddhist mantras as well as other forms of economic competition between the shamans and the lamas (2012a: 92–95). In addition, she touches upon the Qing legislation, in which shamans and lamas were mentioned (2012a: 100; 2024: 22–23; 2013: 173). All these aspects emphasise that shamanism did not develop in a legislative vacuum, and Buddhism influenced the introduction of new laws in order to establish its position.

Against the backdrop of this in-depth socio-historical contextualisation, Kollmar-Paulenz's focus is not so much philological but rather historic-anthropological and is clearly predicated on the analysis of specific practises that the Buddhists contested (2007: 18). Kollmar-Paulenz elaborates on the emphasis put on the physical performance of religion in a separated paper, which relates the history of Mongolian religion(s) to the discourse of the body, with added focus on gender aspects (2012b). These approaches shift Mongolian shamanism away from its previous "ahistorical" and rigid space of cosmology, mythology, and "ritualogy," placing it instead in the framework of intellectual-textual, political-economical, and body-related history. The theories and methodology that Kollmar-Paulenz introduced and applied to the study of Mongolian shamanism were innovative and much needed in the field of Tibetan and Mongolian studies.

From the outset of the project on Mongolian Buddhist intellectual tradition, Kollmar-Paulenz stressed that her topic is related to the discourse of the Buddhist elites (2007: 18; 2024: 30–31; 2013: 184). Consequently, Mongolian shamanism, as deconstructed by Kollmar-Paulenz, is bounded to the reality of the (dominant) texts and leaves the question of social "reality" open.

The voices "from below," including those of the shamans, are absent outside of Buddhist-Mongolian historiography. In these narratives, they merely fit into their historical role as the conquered. In this respect, scholars who follow post-colonial premises might well have expressed their critique of Kollmar-Paulenz's studies. However, seemingly the most problematic concept that emerged from *Lamas and Shamans* as well as from other papers on neighbouring topics is the idea of the global history of religion(s), which, in Kollmar-Paulenz's words, "challenges European hegemony over analytical concept of 'religion'" (2024: 32–33; 2013: 187).

Several scholars, who also follow the premises of a discursive and post-colonial study of religion(s), have expressed their scepticism towards Kollmar-Paulenz's studies. Adrian Hermann criticises the search for equivalents of the term "religion" in non-Christian cultures and opts for focusing on translations, where "meaning itself becomes a phenomenon under investigation" (Hermann 2016: 107). In his opinion, a "focus on translingual practice makes it possible to conceptualise equivalent signifiers for 'religion' in different languages without necessarily grounding them in a shared signified 'phenomenon'" (Hermann 2016: 107). Instead, Hermann opts to focus on contradictions that can aid to build "hypothetical equivalents of 'religion'" (Hermann 2016: 111). On a more fundamental theoretical level, Frank Neubert points out two aspects that, in his view, run contrary to the discursive approach to the study of religion(s): the *will to see* and find a non-European equivalent of "religion" which, in turn, implicates the existence of a "definable field" (*abgrenzbarer Teilbereich*) of religion (Neubert 2014: 183). Both Neubert's and Hermann's remarks question the implied pre-existence of an object of investigation, since such postulation would contradict a "pure" discursive approach (assuming that such a pure approach exists).

Expressing their opinions on the "problem" of the emic term(s) for "religion," Neubert and Hermann both refer to Kollmar-Paulenz's works. Neubert's assessment of her approach as "not-orthodox-enough" in terms of what "discursive" means or should mean, is seconded by Hermann's explicit critique of the search for one-to-one correspondence with the term "religion" in non-European contexts and by his call for a narrow investigation into the translation processes preceded by the establishment of hypothetical binaries. Regarding Hermann's critique, such hypothetical binaries—for example, religion-non-religion, religion-or-superstition, our-religion-your-religion—are not to be found in the Mongolian context, because these hypothetical equivalents are, once again, deeply rooted in the European history of religion(s). They can be established only as the *result* of discourse and cannot be used as its premises, as Kollmar-Paulenz showed in the paper concluding her work on the topic (Kollmar-Paulenz 2017). Regarding Neubert's point, the *will to see* "religion" in a particular language is necessary for one reason: to mark the initial area of investigation. In other words, the emic terms serve to approximately mark *where* to look for certain practises that formed religion(s) in non-European contexts. Hence, the question is not whether there were "religion(s)" outside of Europe but rather whether they were outside of textual tradition(s).

Hermann's and Neubert's stances have one thing in common: They are framed by a definition of discourse that is rigidly tied to language. However, to quote Foucault, in the discourse analysis, "words are as deliberately absent as things themselves" (Foucault 2002: 53). Consequently, discourse analysis must be placed *outside* the language milieu. In Kollmar-Paulenz's study, it surely is. For her, the discursive approach to the global study of religion(s) is not a search for term(s) that can be translated as "religion"; rather, it is the contestations of various practises within the field marked by such terms. In my view, this is the crucial point of her works, which surely can be extended to the programme of a global history of religion: to place a historical discourse analysis *outside* the textual marker and outside of rigid frames of philology. Instead, as Kollmar-Paulenz shows, the understanding of "religion" applied to emic contexts should be framed as a history of body-related practises (2017: 244). Framed in such a way, "religion" becomes a marker for image(s) animated by practises that stand *outside* of "religion"—perhaps even outside of language itself.

As part of this Western discourse on "religion," Kollmar-Paulenz argues that "shamanism" owes its existence on a global scale to the hegemonic dominance of the European protestant model of "religion" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012a: 91). What she showed, however, was that shamanism in Mongolia was *also* constructed—but on the Buddhist model instead. It was "Buddhism gone wrong" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012c: 12; 2024: 17–18; 2013: 166), emerging due to the contact of Buddhists with the "religious others," the shamans. Consequently, in the author's words, "the notion of 'shamanism,' however, exists not only in the Western anthropologist's imagination, but already existed in the imagination of Mongolian Buddhist intellectuals of the 17th to 19th centuries" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2012: 16). Kollmar-Paulenz's works and those of other scholars published in *Religion in Asien?* show that

> [...] contrary to the [dominant] thesis, Asian cultures did indeed identify, sometimes in very specific ways, segments of culture that we would classify as 'religion' [...] in situations where religious agents see themselves confronted with a certain 'Other' with which they are competing. (Deeg/Freiberger/Kleine 2013: xviii–xix)

One outcome of Kollmar-Paulenz's project on Mongolian shamanism was also my own work on Buryat shamanism (Sobkowiak 2023), in which I focus on the micro-histories in Transbaikalia and relate them to the Buryat-Buddhist and Russian elite-discourse. My work confirmed Kollmar-Paulenz's research, though it also showed that the reality of the Mongolian elite discourse is perhaps too rigidly placed in the semantic unity (*Bedeutungsgebundenheit*) of the Mongolian language (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007: 17). The unifying concept of "religion" thus sometimes runs independently of the historical and geographical spaces. Notwithstanding these remarks, my study showed that—through the power of dominant histories (for which I coined the term "histonomy")—Buryat shamanism was indeed "created" and emerged as a unified entity in 19th-century Transbaikalia. It emerged in the process of partial "othering" of material objects, practises, and people, on the one hand, and their appropriation in new historical circumstances,

on the other. Surprisingly, it turned out that the shamans played a marginal role in this process but eventually emerged as leaders of a full-fledged religion with its own history.

In my opinion, one of Kollmar-Paulenz's crucial observations on the history of (Mongolian) religion(s) concerns the emphasis on *lack* that underpinned the (Buddhist) perspective on their religious "Others": the lack of books, the lack of knowledge, the lack of religion and, consequently, the lack of civilisation (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 17–18; 2013: 166; 2014: 125), enhanced, in turn, by the images of (non-Buddhist) "barbarity" of "people who eat and drink the flesh and blood of living beings" (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 12–13, FN 26; 2013: 159, FN 26). This image is ostensibly familiar—the religion of the book(s) creates its non-religious others through the negative image of "barbarous illiterates." If the history of the colonial "Other(s)" can be expressed in terms of *lack* and *will*, then the historical will to see non-European cultures in terms of a deficiency of religion might perpetuate the will to see them deprived of religion in the future global world. If it was so, the colonial will to see non-European cultures "through" religion turns nowadays into the will to see the absence of religion in the future world animated, once again, by the achievements of the "West." However, as the Mongolian case proves, every loss of the previous familiarity of objects and practises is preceded by the recognition of this familiarity in the first stance. The "achievements" of the Western world might thus not necessarily be accepted elsewhere.

In most regions of the world, including Europe, religion has played, and still plays, a vital socio-political role. Religion is a historical entity, so it cannot exist without or outside of history. Consequently, the global study of religion(s) needs to study the images and practises that still perpetuate socio-political power relations in European and non-European cultures. The studies of the latter, however, should not rely on the imposition of apparently universal concepts; nor should concepts created outside of European epistemological tradition be introspectively applied to enrich the Western, already quite rich, world. While Hermann calls a decade of Kollmar-Paulenz's work a "fruitless and tautological search for the existence of equivalents" (Hermann 2016: 106), Wittgenstein reminds us, "Tautology leaves to reality the whole infinite logical space; contradiction fills the whole logical space and leaves no point to reality" (Wittgenstein 1922: 98, no 4.463). Indeed, the implicit tautology is what underlines the search for equivalents of the term "religion" in cultures that developed their traditions independently from Christianity. Tautology facilitates an image of intellectual, cultural, and even diachronic oneness, as Kollmar-Paulenz illustrates in the last sentences of *Lamas and Shamans* (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 35–36; 2013: 191). Framed in such a way, the study of religion(s) can very well drop its "s" and become an object of global study in human epistemology seen as one.

Bibliography

Deeg, Max / Oliver Freiberger / Christoph Kleine. 2013. "Einleitung." In *Religionen in Asien? Studien zur Anwendung des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. by Peter Schalk / Max Deeg / Oliver Freiberger / Christoph Kleine / Astrid van Nahl. Uppsala: Uppsala University, ix–xix.

Foucault, Michel. 2002. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. London / New York: Routledge.

Hermann, Adrian. 2016. "Distinctions of Religion: The Search for Equivalents of 'Religion' and the Challenge of Theorizing a 'Global Discourse of Religion.'" In *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*, ed. by Frans Wijsen / Kocku von Stuckrad. Leiden: Brill, 97–124.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2007. *Zur Ausdifferenzierung eines autonomen Bereichs Religion in asiatischen Gesellschaften des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts: Das Beispiel der Mongolen*. Bern: Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2008. "Forming A Mongolian Buddhist Identity: The Biography of Neichi Toin." In *Biographies of Eminent Mongol Buddhists*, ed. by Johan Elverskog. Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 13–28.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2012a. "The Invention of 'Shamanism' in 18th–Century Mongolian Elite Discourse." *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* LXV/1, 90–106.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2012b. "Embodying the Dharma. The Buddhist Way into Mongolia." In *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, ed. by István Keul. Berlin: De Gruyter, 239–261.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2012c. "A method that helps living beings: How the Mongols created 'shamanism.'" *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragnesia* 12 (5/2), 7–19.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2013. "Lamas und Schamanen: Mongolische Wissenordnungen vom frühen 17. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur Debatte um aussereuropäische Religionsbegriffe." In *Religionen in Asien? Studien zur Anwendung des Religionsbegriffs*, ed. by Peter Schalk / Max Deeg / Oliver Freiberger / Christoph Kleine / Astrid van Nahl. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 151–200.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2014. "Systematically Ordering the World: The Encounter of Buriyad-Mongolian, Tibetan and Russian Knowledge Cultures in the 19th Century." *Études de lettres* 2–3, 123–146.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2017. "Of Yellow Teaching and Black Faith: Entangled Knowledge Cultures and the Creation of Religious Traditions." In *Dynamics of Religion. Past and Present. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 67, ed. by Christoph Bochinger / Jörg Rüpke. Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 231–250.

Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. 2024. "Lamas and Shamans: Mongolian Orders of Knowledge from the Early 17th to the 21st Century. A Contribution to the Debate on Non-European Concepts of Religion." AЯGOS 3 (2) Special Issue Towards a Global History of Religion, 6–47.

Neubert, Frank. 2014. *Die diskursive Konstitution von Religion*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Schalk, Peter / Max Deeg / Oliver Freiberger / Christoph Kleine / Astrid van Nahl, eds. 2013. *Religionen in Asien? Studien zur Anwendung des Religionsbegriffs*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.

Sobkowiak, Piotr. 2023. *The Religion of the Shamans: History, Politics, and the Emergence of Shamanism in Transbaikalia*. Paderborn: Brill Schöningh.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan.

About the author

Dr. **Piotr Sobkowiak** serves as a research assistant at the Institute for the Science of Religion of the University of Bern. His research areas include the socio-political history of religions in southern Siberia and Mongolia, with an analytical focus on "bookless" religious traditions examined through the lens of post-structural theories of history.

Mail: piotr.sobkowiak@unibe.ch