
Since the 20th century, the Sant tradition of the 15th–17th centuries is often seen as a predecessor of modern Hinduism. David Lorenzen has used it as an important example in his provocative essay, ‘Who Invented Hinduism’, to show that the modern concept of Hinduism has older roots than the 19th century. However, this strategic appropriation has overshadowed the fact that the Sant tradition moved between the Sufi and (Nath-)Yogi traditions, and set itself apart from the rest by claiming to reach a union with God without the assistance of any established institution, be it brahmanical rituals, institutional Islam, or anything else. From this viewpoint, the Sant poets developed an elaborate comparative perspective for the Indian context, which was not based on a dichotomy between Muslim and Hindu traditions but adopted a more plural approach. In the 19th century, these aspects of the Sant tradition became important when Indian reformers were confronted with Western concepts of “religion” and searched for Indian traditions that would express similar concepts. However, in that process, the Sant tradition was decontextualized and appropriated for strategic use. This development reached another level when, in the 20th century, the Sant tradition changed from being the predecessor of “religion” into becoming the antecedent of modern concepts of Hinduism. This article attempts to get behind this change, back to the Sant tradition and its sources, to place the later developments in their proper context.

MAX DEEG: Religiöse Identität durch Differenz und Abgrenzungsdiskurs als indirekte Anerkennung von Gemeinsamkeit: chinesisch-buddhistische Apologetik und ihr „Religions“begriff

This chapter discusses discourses of (religious) difference as an area where a meta-concept “religion” can be grasped in a pre-modern context. The examples are mainly taken from the Chinese inter-religious apologetic and critical discourse which recognizes, despite all differences, that even the opponent belongs to the same category (jiao, “(religious) teaching”) and represents the same transcendant
It is argued that this reflects a meta-concept of “religion” in the modern sense more than any attempt to establish a one-to-one semantic correspondence of non-Western terms and “religion”.

OLIVER FREIBERGER: Religionen und Religion in der Konstruktion des frühen Buddhismus

This chapter discusses various questions regarding the concept ‘religion’ that are related to early Buddhism. First it shows, by revisiting scholarly writings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that scholars of religion did not agree at all whether or not early Buddhism should be classified as a ‘religion’. The fact that there was a variety of definitions of religion, which could or could not include early Buddhism, shows that it is not helpful to speak of ‘the’ European concept of religion. Second, the chapter examines canonical Pāli texts and asks whether the segment in society that we would call ‘religion’ (being intentionally broad, considering the variety of definitions) was identified as such already by the ancient authors. It shows, by looking at particular terms and concepts, that the authors did indeed identify a religious field on which Buddhist monastics competed with other religious experts (ascetics and Brahmins). In the third part, the chapter discusses the use of the term pāsaṇḍa in Emperor Aśoka’s inscriptions. It argues that Aśoka referred to ‘religions’ in the modern sense – to social institutions that have religious experts and laypeople and particular, distinguishable worldviews. The chapter concludes by arguing that the suggestion that the concept ‘religion’ was an exclusive invention of modern European history must be dismissed.

CHRISTOPH KLEINE: Religion als begriffliches Konzept und soziales System im vormodernen Japan – polythetische Klassen, semantische und funktionale Äquivalente und strukturelle Analogien

This article is based on the theoretical premise that “religion” can be seen as a social system in accordance with N. Luhmann. Although this approach does not depend on the existence of a semantic equivalent in a given culture to justify the use of the term “religion” in that specific context, it can nevertheless be useful to ask whether the
culture in question developed structural analogies to the “religious-secular-distinction” by way of classification. Taking three examples from pre-modern Japan – Kūkai, Nichiren, and Tominaga Nakamoto – it is shown that the Japanese did in fact treat Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Brahmanism, and Shintō as members of the same polythetic class alternatively denoted as kyō (‘teaching’), dō (‘way’) or hō (‘law’). These terms themselves are evidently no exact equivalents to the so-called modern European term “religion”, a term that is rendered as “shūkyō” in modern Japanese. On the other hand it is obvious that the premodern Japanese treated traditions that we habitually call “religion” as belonging to a certain category, class, or as subsystems of the social system religion. It is suggested that the respective class was not only formed with a view to the family resemblances of their members, but – at least in a later process of reflection – primarily by ascribing a particular function to the class and its potential members as a feature with a high cue validity. It seems that the alleged competence to cope with contingency was seen as such a feature. The more a tradition was believed to be capable of fulfilling this function it was regarded as a prototypical member of the class. However, the class prototype and the main features that constitute the class are variable.


The spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the Mongolian regions from the late 16th century onwards led to confrontations between Buddhist monks and indigenous religious specialists, the male and female shamans. These encounters have been told and retold in a variety of Mongolian sources belonging to different literary genres (among others, historical chronicles, biographies, juridical texts, terminological dictionaries, letters and petitions to banner regets). On the basis of a close examination of the terminology used in these works to denote the Buddhist and non-Buddhist concepts as well as the religious protagonists, individuals and groups, the paper analyses the terminological development of an autonomous field of “religion” in the Mongolian knowledge cultures from the 17th century up to the 21st century. The microstudy is set in the greater context of a “global history of religion”, a concept that aims to broaden the theoretical perspectives on “religion” by engaging with non-European (here: Asian) intellectual concepts.
HANS MARTIN KRÄMER: An der Schwelle zum modernen Religionsbegriff: Der Beitrag japanischer Buddhisten, 1850–1880

A dominant interpretation of the way the modern concept of religion took shape in nineteenth-century Japan, recently reinforced through the reception of postcolonial studies, has been to argue for the predominance of the Western, i.e. Christian, paradigm. According to this view, Protestant notions of religion, mediated by Western missionaries, came to dominate Japanese understandings of religion, as visible in the religious policy of the modern Japanese state. In contrast, the contribution of indigenous actors, most importantly that of religious specialists themselves, has been largely overlooked. Representatives of both Shintō and Buddhism were forced to articulate their own role in the modernizing society when the new Meiji state began searching for an appropriate religious policy in 1870. In the Buddhist (especially True Pure Land) reactions, two things become apparent. One, Buddhists were ready to embrace new concepts reflecting a new order of knowledge, but did so with their own agenda in mind, such as when they demanded a degree of freedom from state interference. Two, while resorting to new terminology, their thinking at the same time reflected older precedents, such as the traditional figure of “mutual dependence of kingly law and Buddha-dharma” (ōbō buppō sōi). Buddhist reactions to early Meiji-period religious policy thus show that the appropriation of “religion” rested equally on foreign models and indigenous initiative and precedence.


This article sets out to investigate steps in the ‘translingual’ processes of translating and adapting the Western concept of ‘religion’ in the Chinese discursive context. While the term zongjiao (in Japanese pronounced as shūkyō) was first coined in Japan in the late 19th century the re-introduction and adaptation in China occurred under very different conditions in the first decades of the early 20th century. While the main steps of the process have been examined earlier this article selects three cases of how the Chinese bi-syllabic neologism zong-jiao was appropriated relating the term back to earlier meanings and usages of its components. In each of the three cases
(Liang Qichao, Xie Fuya and the author of a popular-religious introduction, Wang Binggang) especially the character zong is interpreted in very different ways. As a methodological approach the article refers to Lydia Liu’s idea of translingual practice which relates the practice of translation strictly to its discursive conditions.

MARTIN REPP: Äquivalente Begriffe zum Religionsbegriff in den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Buddhisten und Jesuiten im Japan des 16./17. Jahrhunderts

This article investigates terms in European and Japanese sources of the 16./17. centuries, which were used for the modern word “religion”. The Jesuit missionaries understood religio in the contemporary meaning of a “monastic order”. In their encounter with Buddhists and Shintoists they employed lex (or lei, law) in the sense of today’s “religion”, for example in expressions such as the “laws of Japan”, the “law of the kami (deities)”, the “laws of Śākyamuni” or “God’s law” (i.e. Christianity). The European expression “Śākyamuni’s law” corresponds directly with the Japanese Buddhist expression buppō, meaning Buddha’s law or dharma. Later, during the time of persecution (ca. 1638–1889), the Japanese legal term for “Christian religion” was kirishitan shūmon (teaching gate of the Christians). During the beginning of the Meiji Period, the concrete expression shūmon was then replaced in legal texts by the rather abstract term shūkyō (religious teaching) which is still today in general use as denotation for the Western term “religion”.

MARTIN RIESEBRODT: Religion als analytisches Konzept und seine universale Anwendbarkeit

The concept of religion is in a state of crisis. Whereas contemporary functionalist sociology has overgeneralized it, postmodern deconstructionism has extremely limited it. Against both Riesebrödt defends a general, content-based concept of religion by focusing on the institutionalized practices of ordinary people across traditions and historical epochs. He argues that it is not the linguistic term and its potential equivalents in other languages that legitimate the concept of religion, but the meaning of practices. And there are common meanings all religions of all times have institutionalized in the liturgies that inform their religious practices, namely the promise that superhuman powers can assist humans averting misfortune, help
them coping with crises, and deliver temporal blessings or even eternal salvation.

ULRIKE ROESLER: Die Lehre, der Weg und die namenlose Religion: mögliche Äquivalente eines Religionsbegriffs in der tibetischen Kultur

The Tibetan language has several words that are similar to, but not identical with the word “religion”, the closest equivalents being chos and chos lugs. However, on the one hand chos became particularly closely linked with Buddhism, and on the other hand composite expressions with chos can also be used for the secular order of society. For both reasons the word is no exact equivalent of “religion”. The article explores the Tibetan vocabulary for religious doctrine, religious practice, various religious groups, and religion as opposed to the secular sphere. It then analyses several passages from Tibetan works and argues that religions are perceived and described as competing, but therefore also analogous phenomena. It therefore seems justified to say that – even without an exact lexical equivalent – Tibetan authors have an implicit concept of “religion” that could be described in terms of Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances”.

PETER SCHALK: Tamil Concepts for Religion

Our task is to find terms for “religion” in the history of the Tamils. An attempt to search terms for “ritual” in the history of the Tamils, has already been accomplished.

There are some scholars who ascribe to the Tamils an initial, “almost” non-religious state during the pre-Pallava period. It would be vain in this case, not only to search for religiosity but also for concepts about religiosity. Our goal is to show that Tamil speakers have always understood not only to speak religiously – that should be taken for granted – but also to talk about religion.

There are two high-frequency terms in Tamil, which we today normally translate with ‘religion’, namely camayam and matam. Both are tamilisations from Sanskrit samaya and mata. The etymology of camayam/samaya (or matam/mata) does not get us into the proximity of the two etymologies of religio as ‘binding’ and ‘repeating’. camayam means ‘coming together’, ‘assembly’ and then also the result of a cohesive meeting, namely ‘convention’ ‘contract’. It is the context, which determines whether a political, economic or
religious ‘coming together’ is envisaged and what the nature of the convention is. Camayam belongs both to a religious and to a secular context.

The concept camayam was not frequent before the 6th century. Then, the work Maṇimēkalai tuṟavu, used it intensively alongside with other works. That brings us to the problem of how religious specialists spoke about their religion in the Pre-Pallava period before camayam became frequent.

The relation between camayam and matam is also taken up. Both concepts are studied in the Pallavaperiod, the Cōḷaperiod and the colonial period. The following works were consulted: tirukkuṟal und nālaṭiyār, cilappatikāram and maṇimēkalai tuṟavu, tēvāram, tiruvācaκam und tiruvāṭavūraṭikaḷ purāṇam, nilakēci, pēriyapuruṇam, civaṇāṇcittiyār, and tirukkalampakam.

A study of the influence from the colonial period on the language use of religion among Tamil speakers is ending the presentation.