

## How and Why Should We Study Religions in the Age of Globalisation?\*

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### I. Studying Religions in Society by Words and Humans

Even though Europe and the Mediterranean area have been a melting pot of different religions since antiquity, the up-coming of Christianity during the 4-6th centuries CE turned European culture predominantly Christian. Thus other religions lost ground, only the Jewish people could live on in European

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countries, being tolerated at best. This focus on Christianity increased after the rise of Islam - with its spread to Northern Africa and to Spain from the 8th century onwards. Remembrance of “old” religions was seen as “heathendom” or superstition. Later on in history when European empires aimed to dominate peoples and countries in Africa and Asia, new knowledge relating to various “foreign” of religions was introduced - seen from a Christian perspective. Partly as a reaction against such views, in the 19th century academic comparative studies of religions began to emerge, and in the early 20th century the first professorships of “Comparative Religion” were established in German y.<sup>1)</sup> It is important to keep in mind that most of the universities in the German speaking world - in Germany, Austria and parts of the Switzerland - have a long term tradition of courses and chairs for Christian theologies - mainly Roman-Catholic or Protestant. This leads directly to a crucial question: Is there a difference in studying religions from a (Christian - or any other) theological or from a comparative point of view?

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1) see generally Udo Tworuschka, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Religionswissenschaft* (Darmstadt: WBG Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 2015, 91-14. and especially for the University of Bonn Ulrich Vollmer, “Die Religionswissenschaftler Carl Clemen(1865-1940) und Gustav Mensching (1901-1978),” *Die Bonner Orient- und Asienwissenschaften. Eine Geschichte in 22 Porträts*, edited by Harald Meyer, Christine Schirmacher, and Ulrich Vollmer (Großheirath: Ostasien Verlag), 2018, 43-64; Manfred Hutter, “Karl Robert Hoheisel (1937-2011). Vom Studium der Katholischen Theologie zur Professur für Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft,” *Die Bonner Orient- und Asienwissenschaften. Eine Geschichte in 22 Porträts*, edited by Harald Meyer, Christine Schirmacher, and Ulrich Vollmer (Großheirath: Ostasien Verlag), 2018, 351-363; Gabriele Reifenrath, “Hans-Joachim Klimkeit(1939-1999). Leben und Werk unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner frühen Forschungen zu säkularen und politischen Bewegungen in Indien,” *Die Bonner Orient- und Asienwissenschaften. Eine Geschichte in 22 Porträts*, edited by Harald Meyer, Christine Schirmacher, and Ulrich Vollmer (Großheirath: Ostasien Verlag), 2018, 365-389.

“Comparative Religion” is neither a philosophical nor a theological academic discipline. This is important to mention at first, because in the field of methodology, scholars of Theology (including [Christian] philosophy) and Comparative Religion use philological and anthropological methods alike. In recent times Christian theologians take also interest in “other” religions to develop forms of interreligious theology as a result of an increase of religious pluralism in the modern world.<sup>2)</sup> The main point of differentiating between Theology and Comparative Religion is - in my opinion - the position of the researcher: Any theologian has to conduct his research from the “inner” or insider perspective, and his research has to be done in the light of his own faith. The researcher in Comparative Religion may be a member of one of the religions he is studying, but he must undertake his study from an “outer” or outsider perspective - neither philosophically nor theologically inclined to his subject, but empirically.<sup>3)</sup> Thus the researcher of Comparative Religion cannot and must not deduce universal norms for mankind from the study of religion, as a theologian does from the perspective of his own religion. The theologian and the scholar of Comparative Religion still have much in common, since they both analyse religions as part of the complexities between humans, societies and cultures. Therefore, empirical expressions of any religion make the starting point of every research and we always have to approach “religions” in two ways, namely by approaching Words and Humans.

Starting off with Words: Concentrating first on humankind’s heritage it is crucial to start with studying the religious traditions in their literary or oral

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2) cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 2017.

3) see on the insider-outsider topic in general Russell T. McCutcheon, (ed.) *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion. A Reader* (London and New York: Cassell), 1999.

forms. The spoken or written word in most religions can hardly be underestimated and therefore every researcher should study relevant languages for his purpose of specializing in certain religious traditions. Why focus so strongly on texts and words when studying religions? The answer is quite simple: The complexity of religious doctrines and ideas can best be understood by studying such ideas when (spoken or written) words are given. Observing or partaking in rituals alone is not sufficient to learn and understand the “meaning” of a certain symbolism. Besides that, some of the major religions focus strongly on the “sacred literature” including commentaries and the problem of hermeneutics of “Holy Books” in a globalised world.<sup>4)</sup> If we are not able to catch the exact semantics, our translations and interpretations will go astray - with the risk of changing or miscomprehending a religious idea. Already in 1965 the German Indologist Paul Hacker expressed some important warnings against such miscomprehensions. He drew our attention to the necessity to observe how a given culture puts its worldview into words and how it manages to get a hold of its worldview by using words. When we then translate these words, we must also be aware of the special notion given by the obvious worldview behind the words.<sup>5)</sup> Even if religious studies do not make up as philological studies only, there can be no doubt about its importance if Comparative Religion aims to do justice to the historical and contemporary religious heritage of the world.

Turning to Humans: If we wish to describe (and teach) religions there is

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4) Manfred Hutter, “Sacred Books,” *The Bonn Handbook of Globality. Vol. 2*, edited by Ludger Kühnhard and Tilman Meyer (Cham: Springer International Publishing), 2019, 1377-1385.

5) Paul Hacker, “Zur Methodik der philologischen Begriffsforschung,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 115(2), 1965, 304. [reprint: Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, edited by Lambert Schmithausen (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978), 28.]

another important aspect. Focusing on texts we must remember that “text is not religion”, but only part of it. Religious texts concentrate on the official religion and its normative aspects - e.g. concerning doctrines, religious law or monastic regulations - but there are also limitations, at least the following ones.

(a) In most religions, textual tradition relates to a male point of view, most religious thinkers in history whose words have been recorded, have been men. Female voices have gone unheard most of the time. It is an important task to look for such gender-specific tendencies in every religion, which can hardly be found in texts, but mainly in the voices of living people, foremost women. Looking for humans means “gendering religions” in a balanced study.<sup>6)</sup>

(b) Apart from the “official” side of religious texts we must take into account how females and males practice religion. We have to look at two aspects, namely analysing everyday religion and ways of living according to religion. We should concentrate on all contexts of religion within the life of people - then maybe also coming across tensions between a person’s religious attitude and “official” practices and teachings. In short: We must pay more attention to the relationship between “popular” religion and “official” religion by using sociological and anthropological methods.

If the researcher of Comparative Religion takes interest in the “subjects of religion”, namely humans, deeper insight will be available, leading to a dialogue between people of various religions as part of society, social life and social agency. The scholar though must always try to be neutral, giving equal rights

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6) for gender studies and religion cf. eg. Darlene M. Juschka, “Feminism and Gender Theory,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 137–149.

to all religions and thereby doing them justice.

This leads to a twofold consequence for studying and teaching religions: It is necessary to know religions well, to be able to describe their doctrines and practices. As a result, the researcher can demonstrate that a minor or previously unknown religion within a certain area can be as good as the dominant religions within that same area, and that such “new-comers” must not be marginalised simply because they are deviating from the mainstream religions. In cases of religions developing practices which either suppress or injure some of the members of a religion, a scholar - despite being neutral and at equal distance to all religions - has the right to criticise them. Hence a researcher of religion can act as a “referee” and mediator between religions and society, provided that religions are opposing human rights, freedom of thought or bringing disadvantages to marginalised groups within a society.

## II. Religions in German society

When studying “religion” nowadays, we should always be aware that we have to study more than one religion only to avoid shortcomings in gaining knowledge about religions either in Germany or Korea or elsewhere. Looking at the situation in Germany, a few notes on the plurality of religions there might be useful.

Germany’s population - today 83 million people - consists mostly of Protestants and Catholics since the days of the reformation. Today both Christian groups together only make up about 55-60% of the total population. Besides these two big denominations of “western” Christianity, about 1.2 million people are members of various Orthodox Churches and about 120,000 people are

adherents of denominations of various Oriental Churches. There are also about 100,000 Jews living in Germany with 80% of them having migrated from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. The numbers of Oriental Christians and Jews already depict that the present situation of religious plurality is partly the result of migration processes, which - on a large scale - had already started in the 1960s. Back then the so-called guest workers from Bosnia and Turkey came to Germany, being either Sunni Muslims or Alevites, bringing Islam for the first time to the awareness of many Germans. Meanwhile the number of Muslims living in Germany has risen up to 4.5 million people, about 75% being of Turkic origin. Starting in the late 1960s, gurus of diverse Hindu traditions also began to spread their religions and practice in Germany. Even some Tibetan Buddhist monks came as refugees. Roughly one decade later also Vietnamese refugees (either Buddhists or Catholics) came to Germany, almost coinciding with Hindu refugees who wanted to escape the civil war in Sri Lanka. The present-day number of all Hindus is roughly 120,000 persons - irrespective of their diverse ethnic or denominational background. Also more than 100,000 adherents of Yezidism are now living in Germany, making them the second largest Yezidi community worldwide after the Yezidis living in their Kurdish homelands in the north of Iraq.

A special situation can be seen with Buddhism<sup>7)</sup>: Since the late 1960s the number of Buddhists has risen constantly, depending on two factors, “conversion” and “migration”. Nowadays about 120,000 German-born people have taken the “three jewels”, taking refuge in the Lord Buddha, the Dharma

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7) for general information see Martin Baumann, “Geschichte und Analyse der Anpassung und Etablierung des Buddhismus in Ländern außerhalb Asiens,” *Der Buddhismus III. Ostasiatischer Buddhismus und Buddhismus im Westen*, edited by Manfred Hutter (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 412-416./419f.

and the Sangha. Also Buddhists from Asian countries came to Germany as refugees, totalling now 130,000 to 150,000 persons. These numbers also make us aware of differences between “German” Buddhists and “Asian Buddhists” in Germany. The first ones are well organised in the “German Buddhist Union” as an umbrella organisation and representative for “all” German Buddhists - in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between different Buddhist schools and traditions, to serve as a semi-official spokesman for Buddhism in the public and to be a partner in interreligious dialogue. Most prominent in Germany are Zen-orientated groups, particularly in recent years with a growing number of admirers of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. We also find Germans practising Buddhism according to the Tibetan tradition of the Karma Kagyü or the Gelugpa tradition. Germans in such Buddhist groups or communities are attracted by Buddhism, practising meditation or reading and discussing Buddhist texts; some may also see some kind of a special or even exotic “way of life” in following Buddhism. This is a difference to Asian Buddhists in Germany for whom religion including its rituals and (ethnic) festivals is part of their culture and thus a bond to their native countries. Therefore, there is only very limited contact between German and “Asian” Buddhists.

The Buddhists who came from various Asian countries to Germany are no uniform community either. The biggest group of Asian Buddhists now are about 60,000 Vietnamese people<sup>8)</sup>, who came to Germany since 1978 as refugees or

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8) Manfred Hutter, “Vietnamese Catholics and Vietnamese Buddhists in Germany. Their Position in Local Religious Pluralism,” *Modernity and Religious Life in Vietnam Today*. International Workshop, edited by Vu Van Hieu and Nguyen Quang Hung (Hanoi: Religion Publishing House, 2012), 165–171; Baumann, “Geschichte und Analyse der Anpassung und Etablierung des Buddhismus in Ländern außerhalb Asiens,” 431f.



“boat people” after the war in Vietnam. A small number also came as “contract workers” to the GDR and stayed in Germany after the German Democratic Republic and West Germany were united in 1990. On a religious scale the former contract workers and their families to a large degree are still not deeply interested in religion. The Vien Giac Pagoda in Hannover which was built as a mixture of European and Vietnamese architecture in 1991 has since then become the centre of religious and cultural life for many people of Vietnamese origin in Germany. Another ethnic group of Asian Buddhists in Germany are the Thai people. Their number is quite similar to that of the Vietnamese, but there are two other main differences: Contrary to the large and well-established Vietnamese pagoda, there is no Thai-style temple in Germany. The centres are mostly regular houses, adapted in some way to fit the religious needs. Another special situation is reflected by the demographic data as about 80% of the Thai in Germany are women, many of them living in mixed marriages with a German husband. Outside these marriages there seems to be very little contact with other Germans - also keeping “Thai Buddhism” and “German Buddhism” apart from each other.

Smaller in number are Korean Buddhists, roughly estimated as 12,000.<sup>9)</sup> The first male Koreans came to Germany in the early 1960s to work in mining areas in West Germany, but they were not well organised as a religious community. It took two more decades until in 1984 a first centre of Won-Bulgyo was established, at the beginning only to serve the religious needs of Korean students in West Germany, but soon also German people became attracted to

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9) Manfred Hutter, “Koreanischer Buddhismus in Deutschland,” *Handbuch der Religionen. Ergänzungslieferung 42*, edited by Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworuschka (München: Olzog, 2014), 1-14; Hyeyou Sunim(Moon-Suk Heo), *Der koreanische Buddhismus im Westen. Studien zur Adaption mit besonderem Blick auf die Lehre von Seon-Meisterin Daehaeng* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2018), 204-211.

it - and until today there are some centres all over Germany. The main Korean tradition is Seon starting on an organised and continuing level in Berlin, when a Chogye monk offered meditation on a weekly basis, leading to the foundation of the “International Seon Temple Berlin”. Contemporary to this was also the establishment of the Kwan Um Zen School in Berlin which is an offshoot of centres established worldwide by Seung Sahn. The particular situation of this centre is the background of its followers, because here German Buddhists highly outnumber the Koreans at the activities. This is a clear difference both to the participants of meditation, rituals and other events in the International Seon Temple and also to the Hanmaum Centre in Kaarst, established there in 1996 by the Seon Master Daehaeng Kunsunim. In the centre in Kaarst there are resident Korean nuns who stay there permanently thus establishing continuity to Korean Buddhists in Germany, but also to German visitors who take part in regular activities.

From this overview we can conclude that the rise of religious pluralism in Germany is the result of global political changes which brought large numbers of non-Christian people to Germany, thus making it necessary both for the society as well as for the Christian churches to take this new situation into account. On a juridical level, one has to observe that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam do not have the status as an officially acknowledged religion within Germany as it is the case with Christian Churches and denominations and the Jewish community. There is no general discrimination of religions and Buddhists and people of all other faiths are free to practise their religion, but in the case of Islam sometimes prejudices arise. Doing Comparative Religion offers the possibility to come into close contact with various religions, not on a level of interfaith dialogues, but as a dialogue between people of various religions. A student of religions will therefore have to listen to people, learn

about their views and positions, but there will also occur situations in which the student of religions and the believer of a certain religion will not share the same opinion about that religion. This can happen mainly because Comparative Religion must try to be neutral, giving equal rights to all religions and doing them justice. Thus studying (and teaching) Comparative Religion also gains an important function outside university for the benefit of the society in which the researcher is living.

### **III. Are religions necessary today? Challenges of religions in the modern world**

The situation in Germany with the decline of Christianity and the growth of religious pluralism brings changes in society. Among some people the fear arises that religion gets lost or that religious institutions lose their influence to other players or agents in the social world. Taking such fears into account, it can easily be seen that the number of people rises, who are no longer part of a religious community and who have separated themselves from any religious institution. The total number of people without a formal affiliation to a religion in Germany is nowadays the same as the number of Catholics or Protestants in Germany. That displays that scepticism about religious traditions or the questioning of religious authorities and institutions developed in the minds of (younger) people on the one hand, but also fundamentalist reactions on the other hand increased to emphasise the fundamental (and “unchangeable”) tenets of religions. Therefore, religions in the modern world face a lot of challenges.

## 1. Materialism and Exploitation

Some people think that religions are no longer necessary today, because religious teachings cannot be reconciled with modern science, and science proves that religions are outdated. This is a shortcoming as we always have to put religious doctrines into the context of the time of their origin. The Jewish and Christian creation story of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, ch. 1 & 2) or the Buddhist story of the origins of the world, the humans and culture as told in the Aggaññā Sutta (Dīgha-Nikāya, ch. 27) cannot be taken as “scientific” descriptions of the origins of the world - based on the “scientific” knowledge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we take such traditions simply as texts based on the “knowledge of science” at the time of their origin, they show that religion does not contradict science in its core, but only when we - in a methodologically unsound way - mix up cultural knowledge of different periods. If one takes such an approach seriously, there is no unsurmountable contradiction between science and religion. In that case the Buddhist idea of the chains of causality (Sanskrit *pratītya-samutpādeḥ*; Korean *yeongi*) - and other ideas from other religions, too - may still be taken as a valuable aspect on how religions can cope with science in the modern world and can help to find a balance between “scientific” materialism and preserving the material world. But one problem for all religions in the modern world must not be neglected: People may stick to the material world without feeling the need of any religion, which - as the German numbers show - might be taken as one (certainly not the only) reason for the decline of religion in daily life for many people. Even people who are aware that the materialistic exploitation of the earth (or other people) is - in the long run - destructive for society, can find arguments outside

of religions to reduce materialism.

What perspectives can religions offer on that topic? We may refer to one important – and relatively recent – common challenge for all people and religions: To save nature and the environment by avoiding pollution or exploitation of natural resources. Commitment in this field – in Europe – started slowly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but grew in importance only during the last decades.<sup>10)</sup> Most of this engagement or groups fostering such activities aiming to save the environment do not officially refer to religious options. Maybe this has been a response to “Christian” positions in the past. Referring to the Biblical creation story with the verse “multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis, ch. 1:28), Christian tradition has now and then legitimised the exploitation of natural resources. But one must not be unfair: Also within the churches in Western Europe activities have started several decades ago – calling for some kind of “ecology of theology or spirituality”, by re-interpreting the just mentioned Biblical quotation – not to exploit nature, but to use nature as god’s gift for the benefit of all humans.<sup>11)</sup> This means that within Christian theology new readings of the “sacred scriptures” are encouraged to search for a balanced relationship between human beings and nature – as both are equal parts of

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10) Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*; edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 3–12; Adrian Ivakhiv, “Nature,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 415–429.

11) Ernst M. Conradie, “Christianity,” *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*; edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 70–78.

god's creation.

Buddhism also sees - like other religions - these challenges for mankind, but one important difference can be mentioned in regard to Christianity: Christianity - due to its cultural background rooted partly in ancient Greek philosophy - traditionally had a clear hierarchy<sup>12)</sup>: Humans are the most important part of god's creation, thus being strongly superior to animals as living beings, and of course also superior to all other forms of "nature". Buddhism due to the idea of rebirth could never develop such a hierarchy indicating that humans are superior to other beings. As a matter of fact all beings had to be handled with *metta* and *karuna*.<sup>13)</sup> Theoretically this had great consequences for Buddhists in relation to "nature", even if everybody will admit that not all Buddhists always have accepted their responsibility to care for an ecological treatment of nature, because of gaining - individual or collective - advantages from natural resources, just as Christians have done. But it seems there are lots of fields where from a religious point of view also Buddhists can engage in ecology. In 1993, the so-called "Parliament of World's Religions", held in Chicago, discussed the document "Towards a Global Ethic. An initial declaration" which was supported by many religious leaders, also from the Buddhist side.<sup>14)</sup> One of the topics (or commitments) of the declaration was the acceptance of respect for life and the sustainability of and the care for the earth. But all these considerations must be aware that they have to take into account the competition of different interests - search for economic profit and religious traditions who might favour ecology. Therefore, every religion has to find the

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12) Daniel E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 22-26.

13) cf. Cooper and James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, 90-105.

14) Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Erklärung zum Weltethos. Die Deklaration des Parlaments der Weltreligionen* (München and Zürich: Piper, 1993), 43.

middle way between economy and ecology, which seems at least partly possible if we consider the following points. One has to take the earth (or the “political” world) as one single system where all people live and want to develop their communities. This requires finding a balance between the interest of a certain religion and its own religious specific ideas and the obligation - of individuals and collectives - to all human beings and their “well-being”. That means that the environment has to be preserved so that every single being can survive - and thus, from a Buddhist point of view, avoid harm to all living beings which might also help to reduce poverty and create a just and fair economic order, as was mentioned as one of the aims of the declaration about “global ethic” from 1993. In my opinion studying religions presents lots of opportunities to contribute to the benefit of humankind and society, as such studies - sometimes, not always - may help to overcome “worldly problems”.

## 2. Human rights and the necessity of gender equality

Caring for “well-being” is not only restricted to preserve natural resources in order for humans to benefit from their relationship to nature by making fair use of it, but of course, it is at least equally important that humans accept values which many religions mention in the so-called “Golden Rule”, which states the principle of treating others as one wants to be treated.<sup>15)</sup> This is some kind of an “ethic of reciprocity”. Just a few - well known - examples of this “Golden Rule”, starting with the saying among ancient Greek philosophers “What you do not want to happen to you, do not do it yourself either”. Very

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15) cf. eg. the detailed studies on the “Golden Rule” by H. T. D. Rost, *The Golden Rule: A Universal Ethic*. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986); Martin Bauschke, *Die Goldene Regel. Staunen, Verstehen, Handeln* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2010).

famous is also the saying of Jesus, quoted in the gospel of Matthew as follows: “Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you even so to them. For this is the law and the prophets”. According to Confucius the rule states: “That is *shu* / reciprocity: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself?” And in Buddhist tradition, a similar saying can be found in Udanavarga (5.18): “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful”. Such sayings show a common base of humans’ care for each other’s well-being, which can be the common ground of a “shared” ethic. With more “details” we come across such core values of religions in many other cases. Buddha’s saying in *Dīgha-Nikāya* 14.3 can be mentioned: “Avoid all evil, do all good things and purify your own heart - that’s the teaching of all the Buddhas.” If we take the three main words (evil, good, heart) of the saying seriously, we can deduce that ethical behaviour in Buddhism is mainly a helpful tool to reach Nirvana. The five Buddhist precepts (*pañca-sīla*) - abstaining from killing, from stealing, from wrong sexual behaviour, from telling lies and from drinking alcohol - elaborate a little bit more that Buddhist ethics can be judged as living one’s life in a way that is also good for others by avoiding things which are harmful to others. From a comparative point of view, one finds similarities to other religions - partly in the second “half” (or “tablet”) of the so-called “Ten Commandments” in the Bible (Exodus, ch. 20) or in a list of similar precepts in the Qur’an (Surah 17). Such enumerations of “virtues” are common in many religions and may be a base for mutual understanding - and at the same time a challenge for all religions and each religious person, as it has to be figured out how to realise these virtues in modernity.



This “Golden Rule” might be taken as an abstract definition of core values which also are Human Rights in general.<sup>16)</sup> The “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” by the United Nations stated in 1948 that everybody is entitled to all rights, irrespective of birth, sex, religion, political opinion and other things (cf. article 2). This declaration further mentions that everyone has the right to marry without any limitation due to religion and one’s rights must not be reduced through marriage or after its dissolution (cf. article 16). The declaration of the free choice to change one’s religion through conversion to another religion or formally to leave one’s religion (cf. article 18) is important as well. We know that there are countries and political leaders who sometimes restrict such freedom, even if the country has signed the United Nations’ declaration or the more detailed “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” of the United Nations from 1966, which became effective in 1976 after its ratification by 53 countries. So fighting for human rights is often necessary - in societies, political parties, governments, but also in religious institutions.

When one reads the just mentioned articles carefully, one also has to admit that within religions it is still necessary to improve aspects of human rights. One challenge for religions - from a secular and individual-based European point of view - is the question of many traditional ideas about sexuality and gender issues. In some religions these ideas are not fully in line with gender equality or at least these ideas lead to an unequal treatment of men and women

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16) Rosalind I. J. Hackett, “Human Rights. An Important and Challenging New Field for the Study of Religion,” *New Approaches to the study of Religion. Vol. 2: Textual, Comparative, Sociological and Cognitive Approaches*, edited by Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2004). and the recent documentation of law cases collected by Hans G. Kippenberg, *Regulierungen der Religionsfreiheit. Von der Allgemeinen Erklärung der Menschenrechte zu den Urteilen des Europäischen Gerichtshofs für Menschenrechte* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019).

within religions, in most cases as a disadvantage for women. As most religious traditions basically take it for granted that only a male–female binary system exists – both in biological sex and sexual identity<sup>17)</sup> –, religious values also face opposition from “sexually liberated persons” or from arguments raised in social and anthropological discourses about gender issues, underlining that sexuality must be seen as one (important) aspect of human relationships and life in general. Therefore, sexuality can no longer be restricted to heterosexual relationships or marriage. Within Christianity – stronger within Catholicism than within Protestantism – the traditional connection of marriage and sexuality (and procreation) is strongly losing ground among its followers. Also Buddhists – partly because of “western influence”, partly because of a different Buddhist world view regarding birth in the circle of life and death – in recent decades started to question traditional sexual values, because any form of sexuality which does not disturb individual human rights or the dignity of the other and which is based on equality between the partners involved in it must be seen as a possibility to shape a person’s sexual identity. What are the ethical consequences for religions and societies? When throughout history sexuality was often regulated by legal norms, which originated from religious values, such

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17) see for the necessary balance and distinction between sex and gender eg. Mark Solms, “The Biological Foundations of Gender: a Delicate Balance,” *Transsexuality in Theology and Neuroscience. Findings, Controversies, and Perspectives*, edited by Gerhard Schreiber (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 5–21; Dick F. Swaab et al., “The Human Brain and Gender. Sexual Differentiation of Our Brains,” *Transsexuality in Theology and Neuroscience. Findings, Controversies, and Perspectives*, edited by Gerhard Schreiber (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 23–41; Manfred Hutter, “Religion and Sexuality in Ethical Discourse. From Biblical Traditions to European Thought and its Consequences for a Comparative Approach to Buddhist Societies,” *Religion and Ethics in a Modern Society. Proceedings of International Conference*, edited by Cong Uanh Nguyen (Hanoi: Religion Publishing House, 2018), 206–208.

norms created a small set of allowed and a larger set of forbidden or at least “deviating” practices.<sup>18)</sup> As these regulations or norms were often expressed from a male point of view (both in Christianity and in Buddhism), they violated both Christian and Buddhist values saying that all humans are equal. One of the ethical tasks in a contemporary society is thus to make people aware that any ideas about sexuality are deeply rooted in different strands of diverse traditions, which must never be reduced to a simple solution. Within Religious Studies it is therefore necessary to discuss and analyse such traditions and views of sexuality, which often originated onesidedly in a male (and not female) brain - and which until today often exclude women on an institutional level from filling positions either as Roman Catholic priestesses or as Theravada Buddhist nuns. Discussions about such topics cannot be solved from the point of Comparative Religion, but solutions to such challenges must be found by theological and/or philosophical discourses among the relevant religion.

Related to this topic of gender restriction are also various unbalanced situations about marriage or divorce - either restricting marriages of partners from different religions, or forbidding divorces or re-marriages within a religion. Here again the study of religion can at least raise the issue that such practices within religions mostly result from tradition and only rarely from core doctrines of a religion. This means that a careful study of the history and the tradition of a religion can spot the necessity to change and give up those - maybe even

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18) Céline Grünhagen, “Homosexuality,” *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopædia of Beliefs and Practices. Vol. 2*, edited by J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 1343-1345; Céline Grünhagen, “Transgender in Thailand. Buddhist Perspectives and the Socio-Political Status of Kathoey,” *Transsexuality in Theology and Neuroscience. Findings, Controversies, and Perspectives*, edited by Gerhard Schreiber (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 219-232; Hutter, “Religion and Sexuality in Ethical Discourse,” 213-215.

age-old - practices, because they do not ensure an equal treatment of all sexes and thus contradict human rights. With the increase of religious pluralism an additional question arises: Marriages between partners of different religions are getting more numerous nowadays than it was the case centuries ago. Restricting such interreligious marriages or allowing only certain combinations according to the religions of the two partners are not in line with general human rights. But there is another aspect: In several cases one of the partners might have to change his or her religion and join the religion of his or her partner. When this is (formally) forbidden - or in the worst case even persecuted - by a religion, we see another situation of the neglect of human rights within the religious field.

### 3. Fundamentalism

Based on “core values”, religions are able to find solutions to contribute together to the benefit of humans. But core values are also risky: Adherents of a religion may say that their “own” values are the only God-given truth which again leads to the restriction of (human) rights. This makes it necessary for all religions and every single religious person to counteract any kind of fundamentalism. Looking back to the “earliest” traditions in their religion, fundamentalists say these traditions are a safeguard against the changes of modernity and they can help people to cope with everyday’s challenges. But one must be critical: Most fundamentalists only allow their very own interpretation of the tradition in a restrictive way. Whoever - either as an individual person or as a group - does not accept the teachings and interpretations of religious fundamentalists, is criticised as an non-believer and fiend of religion. It is well known that fundamentalists reduce their ideology or religion to only one

exclusive truth and remove or even extirpate all those aspects of society and social behaviour which in their point of view are “wrong” and deviating from “god’s plan”.<sup>19)</sup> Everybody must either accept this or she or he will be seen as an outsider of the society at least or even expelled or physically persecuted. In this sense, fundamentalism cannot be reconciled with plurality or freedom of thought.

The term “fundamentalism” originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century within conservative Protestant groups in the USA.<sup>20)</sup> They said - in reaction to modernism - that one must not depart from the “fundamentals” of Christianity, meaning the solely literal interpretation of the Bible, e.g. God’s creation of the world in seven days (with 24 hours each). During the 1980s, the term fundamentalism got worldwide reception as it was applied to various religious, political or social movements, which were labelled as “fundamentalist”. Even if many fundamentalist movements are rooted in monotheistic traditions, it is important to note that every religion can be fundamentalist, also Buddhism.<sup>21)</sup> In a historical perspective one can certainly refer to Sri Lanka, where Buddhist monks already in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became “fundamentalist” in a classical sense - that means: They had “learnt” from English Christian missionaries that the fundamentals of religion must be the Bible, and so Buddhist monks made themselves fundamentalists referring to the “Pali canon” as their normative (and exclusive) source of their religion. Combining these norms of religion with nationalistic dispositions, Buddhism in Sri Lanka then resulted in fundamentalism. Turning to contemporary issues, those

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19) for many examples of “fields of fundamentalism” see Torkel Brekke, *Fundamentalism. Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 101–263.

20) Brekke, *Fundamentalism. Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization*, 21–27.

21) Brekke, *Fundamentalism. Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization*, 80–86.

fundamentalist positions among Myanmar monks can be mentioned who, after the decline of military rule, established their interpretation of a Burmese nationalistic and fundamentalist Buddhism, leading to the marginalisation of other religious traditions - mainly Muslim people in the Union of Myanmar, but also ethnic minorities practising their religious traditions outside the fold of Burmese Buddhism. The so-called 969 movement and the Ma-Ba-Tha movement are well known recent examples of Buddhist fundamentalism. But, of course, fundamentalism is not necessarily connected to politics as these examples have shown. Thailand's Santi Asok movement can be labelled as fundamentalist - not for political reasons, but for their teachings and interpretations of Buddhism, which not only exclude most Thai Buddhist practices, but which also say that Santi Asok is the only "authentic Buddhism" that holds up the fundamentals of Buddha.

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

## IV. A short conclusion

Comparative Religion has developed within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at universities in Europe from a mainly European point of view. More than one century of research has brought some fascinating insights into the world of religions, but there have also been some shortcomings due to focussing research on a European perspective. Therefore, it will be good and necessary for the future, firstly to broaden our approach in the field of Comparative Religion in a way that the subject should gain more importance at universities outside European spheres of thought. Secondly it is equally necessary that European scholars in religion learn from people in Asian countries. As mentioned before - and also by describing the situation of religions in Germany - taking a look at religions through “European eyes” only, the scholar sees half of the truth. The study of religion (in Europe) is often still based on questions and interpretations which have their roots in Christianity as a main aspect of European culture - but sometimes such basics also lead the scholar to wrong conclusions. This should be considered as a methodological warning to avoid mistakes while interpreting religions as an “outsider”.

How can one avoid this: A student of Comparative Religion - in an idealistic case - has to develop various competences.<sup>22)</sup> The first one is an excellent knowledge of the history of religions, covering at least two different religions, say e.g. Mahayana Buddhism and Catholic Christianity - or put even broader: one religion of a so-called “monotheistic” setting and the other of a contrary type, maybe a traditional religion of Africa or specialising in some kind of

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22) Richard Friedli, “Angewandte Religionswissenschaft,” *Wege zur Religionswissenschaft. Eine interkulturelle Orientierung*, edited by Hamid Reza Yousefi, Klaus Fischer, Ina Braun and Wolfgang Gantke (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2007), 84-87.

Shamanistic worldview, myths and rituals. While this competence relates to the (classical) field of “history of religion” - thus focussing on Words, another competence of the researcher should be his or her ability in some methods of social sciences or sociological and political theories, as religions are always deeply intertwined with people in their society - and thereby focussing on Humans. By combining such methodological approaches, a researcher of religion will be able to study his subject in an interdisciplinary way which is necessary to analyse, interpret, understand and communicate religions in a globalised world.

This interdisciplinary approach for studying religions is also necessary, because religions are a part of society and culture - fields which are studied within humanities and social sciences alike. This means of course that also other researchers in the humanities cover aspects of “religion(s)” in their research, say e.g. rituals, mythological texts, forms of institutionalisation or questions of “identity” and mutual exchanges of ideas - sometimes leading to “syncretism” or re-arranging of traditions. Such examples show that “religion” is not a topic which is (or should / can be) studied exclusively by the scholar of religions. But it seems the special field of “Comparative Religion” includes two aspects which always have to be the centre of the research: Comparison and the “religious community” can be seen as the core points for this field. Comparison on different levels allows the researcher to understand religious phenomena in their broader contexts, and thus helps by way of comparison to see both the common topics and the diverse aspects of religions clearly - which makes it possible to evaluate the importance of religions in the modern world. Looking at the religious community, the researcher always has a group to “correct” his interpretation, but also to share knowledge of “insiders” with the researcher which might help him or her to give a balanced description of religions.



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

Key Words: Globalisation, Modern World, Comparative Religion,  
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Abstract

## How and Why Should We Study Religions in the Age of Globalisation?

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Modern society has been changing over the last decades. Such changes also affected religions and the study of religion. Some scholars speak of a “cultural turn” which means a shift in studying religions from a purely philological point of view to looking at them in a broader way - by also taking religious practices, rituals, and behaviour into account, instead of dogmatic teachings only. Scholars of religion should always try to present a balanced view: taking into account a “traditional” approach which always focusses on the historical and/or contemporary spread of a certain religion, while also asking about challenges religions are faced with in a globalised world with its social changes - thus respecting this “cultural turn”. Viewing religions from the one side, we may use the label Words and exemplify this with a short description of religious plurality in Germany, and viewing religions from the other side we may use the label Humans to illustrate this with several examples of modern challenges of religions.

Key Words: Globalisation, Modern World, Comparative Religion,  
Interdisciplinary Approach

국문초록

## 세계화 시대에 어떻게 그리고 왜 종교 연구를 해야 하는가

Manfred Hutter (Bonn Univ.)

지난 수십 년에 걸쳐 일어난 현대 사회의 변화는 종교와 종교 연구에도 영향을 미쳤다. 일부 학자들은 순수한 문헌학적 관점대신 더욱 넓은 시각으로 종교를 연구하는 “문화적 전환”을 이야기한다. 교리적 가르침만을 다루기보다 종교적 실천, 의례, 행위를 고려하자는 것이다. 종교 연구자들은 개별 종교의 고금의 전개에 초점을 맞추는 “전통적인” 접근을 고려하면서도, 세계화와 사회 변화에 따라 종교가 직면하게 된 도전에 대해 물으며 균형 잡힌 견해를 제시하려는 노력을 부단히 해야 한다. 본 논문에서는 “Words”라 이름 붙인 한 편의 시각에 대해 독일의 종교적 다양성을 예를 들어 서술한다. 또한, “Humans”라 이름 붙인 다른 시각에 대해서는 오늘날 종교가 마주한 도전의 몇 가지 예를 들어 보이겠다.

주제어: 세계화, 현대 사회, 비교종교학, 간학문적 접근