

Report: “Religious Pluralism In Europe and Asia: Conditions, Modes, and Consequences”

Part I: From Antiquity to the Times of Colonialism (28-30 September 2012)

A joint venture by the Department of Religious Studies, University of Texas at Austin, and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” at Ruhr-Universität Bochum

By Jessie Pons and Sven Wortmann

This Conference on Religious Pluralism at the University of Texas Austin has been a great venue. It was an interesting experience to spend three days on the campus of one of the most prestigious universities of the United States and have the opportunity to meet some of the leading scholars in the field of Religious Studies, History and Linguistics with specialisations from Europe to Asia. Despite the many other activities which were taking place simultaneously, a significant number of people attended the conference (approximately fifty persons including the twenty participants) and contributed to the discussions. The relaxed and enthusiastic exchanges have been just as dynamic in the conference room as during coffee breaks and dinners thanks to the perfect organisation of Karl Galinsky (Austin) and his assistants.

In his keynote lecture, Thomas A. Tweet introduced the latest developments of his flow metaphors for the study of Religious Pluralism. After a brief outline of his theoretical framework he illustrated his approach drawing upon a case study on pre-modern funerary practices in Santa Fe. He further developed its methodological implications, giving ten guiding principles for the study of religion.

Session I: Multiple traditions In the Near East and the Mediterranean

In the first session, Eckart Frahm (Yale) discussed how the rise of the new Assyrian and Babylonian imperial states affected the official religion of the elite and that of subjects. By comparing the situation in the Neo-Assyrian Empire at Nineveh and Assur, the Neo-Babylonian Empire at Babylon and the city of Uruk in Southern Babylonia, that is to say places located both at the centre and at the periphery of the imperial power, Eckart Frahm observed that the authority of the ruling class did not interfere with the religion of the subjects. Accordingly, Erich Gruen (Berkeley) who discussed Religious Pluralism in the Roman Empire – notably with regards to Judaism – proposed that “intolerance” and “tolerance” are not appropriate terms when discussing Roman religious policy. The Roman rulers were, to a large extent, indifferent to the religion of their subjects. In her talk on sacred languages in the medieval Mediterranean, Karla Malette (Michigan) proposed a definition of “sacred language” as a linguistic strategy that a community uses to speak to itself about its confessional practices and its spiritual life. Her case study on Constantine-Cyril showed how his plu-

realistic view of sacred languages come in conflict with that of the Church which only considered three languages as sacred. She also stressed the importance of the materiality of language, i.e. the written alphabet, in the sacrality of the language.

Session II: Encounters of Religions in Central and South Asia

Johan Elverskog (SMU) gave a challenging paper on the relationship between the diffusion of Buddhism and the economy of rice. During his talk, he criticized the focus on religious semantics in the history of religion and proposed to revise the history of Buddhism under the viewpoint of economics. The discussion which his paper triggered dominated the debate of the conference to a great extent. Robert Mayer discussed the question of religious pluralism in 12th century Tibet by (re-)assessing the historical trajectories of Bon, Tibet's indigenous religion and Buddhism, an imported religion. He highlighted dynamics of negotiation between Buddhism and Bon and showed ways in which the two traditions mutually shaped one another.

Session III: South Asia – Rituals and Architecture

Richard Eaton (Arizona) presented three key moments on Islam's Venture in India: the 13th Century Turkish-Persian migration, the regionalization of Muslim rule in 15th Century Bengal and the indigenization of Muslim rule and law in the 17th Century Deccan. He showed how traditional scholarship overestimated the Muslim-Hindu distinction by ignoring how religious elements have profoundly and consciously been interwoven and accepted in Indian ritual, literature, architecture, politics and law. Jessie Pons (Bochum) showed how the interaction between Brahmanism and Buddhism materializes in the art of Gandhara. She pointed at several mechanisms of iconographic and symbolic borrowings which invite to reconsider the question of religious affiliation of certain iconographic motifs. Sven Wortman (Bochum) gave an outline of the social and semantical emergence of the religious field in ancient India by comparing different strata of Indian literature and by modeling the processes in Bourdieu's field terminology. Sven Wortman contrasted Erich Gruen's example of the Roman rulers' religious "indifference" by showing the active religious policy of Emperor Ashoka.

Session IV: Between East and West

In his talk on Manichaeism and the Emergence of Religious Plurality, Jason BeDuhn (N. Arizona) focused on a Manichaeism text to Mani's attempt at providing a definition of what we refer to as religion under the semantic term "Din" (piety). Mani highlights the commonalities between different religions to draw a paradigm of religion. Dorothea Weltecke (Konstanz) talked about Christians in the multi-religious cities of the Middle East from the 7th to the 13th century. After a few remarks on cities in the Muslim world in general and a sketch of the system of Medieval churches, the author considers modes of interaction, exchange and competition between the various religious trends and shows how the multi-religious and multi-denominational state of the Near East

provided a dynamic factor for Eastern Christians and Christianity in general. Ronnie Po-chia Hsia (Penn State) focussed on the third wave of Christian expansion into China, during the Ming dynasty toward the end of the 16th century and examined the question of religious pluralism from the Christian and Chinese perspective successively. Whereas for the Catholic missionaries, Christianity implied a logic of religious competition and intolerance, it was seen by the Chinese as obvious to the constitution of a multi-ethnic Empire.

Despite the many historical case studies during the presentations the discussion focused mainly on terminological issues like the application of Thomas A. Tweed's flow metaphors as well as on the question triggered by Johan Elver-skog whether religious semantics are over- or underestimated in religious studies. One of the points on which all could agree is that the term "pluralism" is a normative, political term which should be distinguished from the descriptive term "plurality". All the participants showed much interest and engagement in learning from other fields as well as the willingness to work on a common terminology in very direct and stimulating discussions. That is why we are all looking forward to the follow-up conference "From the Age of Colonialism to Present Times" planned for spring 2014.