

Thematic Priority: Handling Religious Diversity/Organizing Religious Encounter

The Eurasian history of religions always developed and still proceeds *under plural conditions*. Beyond differing content religious groups, currents and denominations perceive each other in religious terms (including family resemblances and translations) and thus constitute the unity of regional religious fields and perhaps today even a global religious field (Beyer 2006). As religions ascribe themselves a normative and ordering power, religious plurality can become a challenge for religious traditions as well as for the political or legal regulation of religion.

It has been a prominent goal of the KHK from its very beginning to identify and systematize modes of religious encounter in a comparative perspective. While some encounters occur accidentally and spontaneously as more or less unintended consequences of religious pluralization and densification (e.g. in urban spaces), this thematic priority is to put emphasis on institutionalized forms of intra- and interreligious contact. To be clear, this ‘institutional’ perspective does not require a particular degree of formal organization or stratification. Rather, it seeks to explore religious encounter as a “geteilter Sinnzusammenhang” in the sense of Max Weber based on an explicit or implicit understanding of roles and rules. As a consequence, the aim of analysis would be to understand a given institutional framework and its embedded notions of legitimate religious contact partners and arguments as well as to trace its interplay with the style and contents of religious reasoning and boundary work.

Religious traditions do not just form and develop through outside contacts, but also through internal pluralisation. Internal differences arise in the sense of a polyphony and are often problematised due to other (intrinsic or extrinsic) stimuli (e.g., competition, political rivalries, economic factors etc.). This first of all involves the formation of confessions, sects and schools which are interpreted as the differentiation between “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” all the way to “heresy”. Intrareligious contact also includes internal missionary activities. The Muslim mission, for instance, (Arabic: Da’wa) in the 20th century was not designed first and foremost to convert non-believers, but rather was aimed at its own brothers and sisters in faith, who – influenced by Western secularism and materialism – were thought to have gone astray.

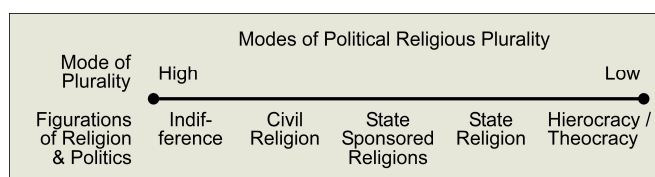
The relations within *interreligious* contact range from religiously induced military violence (e.g. the establishment of the Islamic Mughal Empire, crusades, Singhalese-Tamil civil war) to polemic discourses on a global (for instance Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations) or regional scale (e.g. conflicts over sacred buildings of religious minorities) all the way to attempts of interreligious understanding (such as interreligious disputes in the European Middle Ages, the Parliament of the World’s Religions or local dialogue events).

Finally, religious plurality and encounter have frequently been subject to *external regulation*. From the Mughal and Ottoman Empires to contemporary attempts of diversity governance there have always been political and legal measures of legitimate and illegitimate religion and how it should be treated. Likewise, there have emerged a number of different paradigms of dealing with religious plurality ranging from embracing –or condemning– all religious traditions as far as they accept the “mundane” order to different degrees of privileging one tradition over others. Last, but not least, states and rulers have initiated, moderated or appropriated forms of interreligious encounter, such as disputes or dialogue meetings to actively bring forward their vision of religion and religious diversity.

Departing from these general conceptual considerations there are at least three forms of organized encounter which have become historically relevant and at the same time appear to be promising for cross-cultural analysis:

Religious encounter ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’

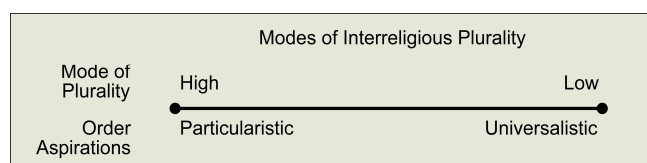
Political bodies, such as empires or states, have early on sought to administer and domesticate religious diversity to ensure what is now called “social cohesion”. The mechanisms of interreligious encounter in the shadow of hierarchy have been manifold ranging from state sponsored disputes among religious representatives on royal courts (Mughal Empire, Spain) to the support and establishment of interfaith councils in modern nation states.



The political and legal attitude toward religious plurality heavily depends on the entanglement of state and religion and the reliance of public authorities on a particular religious tradition as a pillar of social and political order. While hierocratic or theocratic regimes rule out religious diversity relying and ensure social cohesion by religious homogeneity, other figurations of religion and politics are marked by a manner of indifference and hence admit a high degree of religious diversity. In between these poles there can occur a variety of modes of political religious plurality, ranging from a complaisant neutrality of the state towards several religious communities to the legal incorporation of a small number of state sponsored religions or a single state religion.

Interreligious Dialogue and Dispute

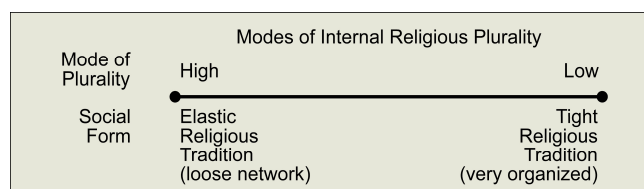
Interreligious Dialogue, for lack of a better word, stands for a variety of genres and formats of interreligious communication, which have been brought about by the religious communities themselves. While the so called Interfaith Movement starting with the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and resulting in the creation of a set of powerful international organizations is often referred to a major driving force for a global religious field, local and earlier forms of organized encounter have been widely neglected. Hence, the thematic priority might help to elucidate different formats of interreligious contact beyond dialogue summits or councils as well as their underlying logics of dealing with religious boundaries. Moreover, it might stimulate discussion about ‘typical’ literary genres as a particular response to religious diversity (ranging from classical polemics presented as interreligious dialogue to anti-mission manuals).



How religious traditions handle interreligious diversity depends on their particularising or universalistic ambitions to provide order and truth; the spectrum ranges from indifference via mutual recognition to violent rejection. Religious traditions with a low ‘order theory profile’ seem to have less difficulty in finding their place alongside others—sometimes in the form of a division of labour—as the examples of ancient-Mediterranean polytheism or the religious policy of the Parthians show.

Intrareligious dissent and domestication

Intrareligious diversity can be addressed through authoritative boundary work based on a distinction between ‘heretics’ from ‘true believers’ or through conciliar processes, such as the early Christian Councils. In the first case, a situation of encounter is created by conceiving of the dissenters as the ‘other’ who has to be convinced (“revoco”) or eliminated. In the second case, intrareligious diversity is consciously negotiated within an institutional framework based on the notion of encounter between different factions or parties.



Even if condensed religious traditions establish themselves, an internal plurality continues to exist. It is not possible, for instance, to speak of “the” Christian or “the” Islamic religion. Different convictions and practices often exist within a religious tradition. How do religious movements, groups or denominations deal with internal plurality, and what a the scientific means to describe and explain.