



KHK Working Paper Series

VIII. Secret/Secrecy

KNUT MARTIN STÜNKEL 

ABSTRACT Our goal for *Entangled Religions* is to inform readers about occasions, themes, modes, conditions, and consequences of contacts between religious groups and the way religious thought and practice developed in and through such contact phenomena, eventually creating both the larger and smaller religious traditions of today and the religious field as a social entity distinct from other fields such as politics, economics, and art. *Entangled Religions* publishes case studies on the issues outlined above. The engagement with explicit analytical concepts is of specific importance, as those concepts shall serve as *tertia comparationis*, which allow comparability of individual case studies. We invite authors to consider engaging their material with analytical concepts, categories and approaches that have been discussed in the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” (2008–2022), or to introduce other concepts and theories to the discussion. The KHK Working Paper Series informs readers about some major aspects of the KHK’s thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

In religious traditions concepts of secret as well as the social action of secrecy express a form of religious practice in its own right.¹ They are indicating a certain process within a special social situation where the secret functions in a certain framework of institutions. Additionally, in many regards, they can be considered as an indicator of a contact situation. First, there is the inherent contact dimension of the secret that connects the human to the divine sphere (see for example Paul in 1. Corinthians 15,51: “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”). But moreover, it might be a fruitful research question to ask for the function of secret within a situation of religious contacts, or because of the situation of contact. [1]

We heartily invite case studies that might refer to the phenomenon of secret in two major aspects: [2]

On the one hand, strategies of secrecy are major instruments in demarcation processes following contact-situations of religious traditions. Situations of contact might trigger the [3]

1 This working paper was written in 2017 and updated in 2023.

voluntary introduction or institutional establishment and the (social) exploitation (concrete practice) of the secret. So, the strategy of secrecy can be studied as the (institutional) establishment and (social) practice of an in-group/ out-group – distinction via secret in situations of contact (for example in antique mystery cults or in Masonic practices of secrecy in Modern Times). In recent scholarship this is the predominant mode of the explanation of the secret as a social technique. Secrecy can be characterized as a mode of exclusion of the other. Following the sociological analysis of Georg Simmel secrets serve as a means to prevent the flow of information within a given society on the one hand and, on the other hand, between different traditions, presumably in order to protect the ‘essentials’ of the prevailing traditions, that is their “identity” (see for example the establishment of sophisticated elitist “Gnostic Secret Myths” as a reaction to the pressure displayed on Gnosticism by Christianity, i.e. the emerging church). Secrecy, thus, is interpreted as a result, but as well as an obstacle for the further contact of different traditions.

On the other hand, there might be aspects of the function of the secret that have other results than the establishment and practice of an in-group and out-group distinction, in particular with regard to those cases, where two of those supposed “in-groups” meet in situations of contact. Here, the secret does not hamper but rather promotes the contact of religious traditions. By definition, the secret might be addressed as such, but it cannot be conceptually grasped. So, semantically, the secret functions as a blank space or as a space of indeterminability. This structural openness makes it as well open for comparison and possible translations. Though these translations based on the structural similarity of one secret and the other are, of course, mostly miscomprehensions (and as such to be fought bitterly by the old secret-carriers) but they, nevertheless, can function as interfaces of transfer (the *interpretatio graeca* performed by Herodotus in explaining the Egypt mysteries with reference to the Greek Mysteries is an example for this function of a secret in a contact situation). Secrets, thus, in situations of contact might function as triggers of inclusion of the prevailing other in one’s own system of thought. [4]

Relevant *Entangled Religions* Articles

- Stadlbauer, Susanne. 2019. “Between Secrecy and Transparency: Conversion to Protestantism Among Iranian Refugees in Germany.” *Entangled Religions* 8. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.8.2019.8322>.
- Noble, Michael. 2023. “The Entanglement of Philosophy, Politics and the Occult: The Hidden Secret of early Post-Avicennan Thought in the Islamic East.” *Entangled Religions* 14 (3). <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.14.2023.10439>.

Further Reading

- Bok, Sissela. 1989. *Secrets. On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York: Vintage.
- Bolle, Kees W., ed. 1987. *Secrecy in Religions*. Leiden: Brill.
- Duncan, Ann Williams. 2006. “Religion and Secrecy. A Bibliographical Essay.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74: 469–82.

-
- Johnson, Paul Christopher. 2002. *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods. The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - Jütte, Daniel. 2011. *Das Zeitalter des Geheimnisses. Juden, Christen und Die Ökonomie des Geheimen (1400-1800)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
 - Kippenberg, Hans G., and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds. 1995. *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: Brill.
 - Scheid, Bernhard, and Mark Teeuwen, eds. 2006. *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*. London: Routledge.
 - Simmel, Georg. 2013. *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
 - Stünkel, Knut Martin. 2015. “‘Das Eigentlich Religiöse in der Religion’. Die Bedeutung Des Geheimnisses Für Das Judentum Bei Max Wiener”. In *Juden und Geheimnis. Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen*, edited by Christian Oberlander, 33–48. Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.
 - Urban, Hugh B. 1998. “The Torment of Secrecy. Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions.” *History of Religions* 37: 209–48.