

KHK WORKING PAPER SERIES

VIII. SECRET/SECRECY

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Our Goal for ERiC is to create a comprehensive, easy-to-use online companion to **Eurasian Religions in Contact** that informs 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. The companion will be comprised of **case studies** with each case study focusing on a particular geographical region, a particular moment in or period of time and a particular constellation of two or more religions encountering each other. Each case study will extrapolate the occasions as well as the historical and social contexts of such encounters and, most importantly, shed light on the issues, notions, themes and practices addressed in the particular contact situation.

In each case study, authors will present their material in light of a specific theoretical concept or approach. We particularly encourage authors to consider engaging their material with theoretical concepts and approaches **developed at the KHK Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe over the past years**. This includes specific understandings of the role of concepts such as "purity", "secret", "tradition", "gender", "media", "the senses", "the immanence/transcendence-distinction" and "dynamics/stability". The **KHK Working Paper Series** informs readers about some major aspects within 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. 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. 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.

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

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 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. 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.