



KHK Working Paper Series

IX. Tradition

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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!

The act of calling a given conviction or practice a tradition is typically either a plea for the preservation of that tradition (something “is” a tradition”) or a reaction to such pleas (something is “only” a tradition).¹ [1]

For a working definition of “tradition” for comparative purposes, the KHK has come to consider the following dimensions of tradition: [2]

The temporal dimension: Traditions include a “temporal process (*traditio*) of handing down valued material” (Bronner 2011, 40). They tend not to determine the duration of their past presence, and tend to transfigure their moment of foundation (Balke 2011). **Traditions bridge the difference between continuity and discontinuity.** In this sense, traditions are often understood to stand in opposition to progress, innovation, and, most pointedly, modernity (Bronner 2011, 47). But contrary to this understanding, and from a perspective outside of a given tradition, they are necessarily innovative themselves (MacIntyre 2007, 222) by [3]

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

the very act of constituting something that is to be preserved in the future and which is legitimized with reference to an allegedly superior past. Examples include the prophets in the Hebrew Bible tradition, who were innovative in the sense of creating a tradition and the Protestant Reformation, which set free a potential for innovation precisely by claiming to revitalize the very beginnings of Christianity (*ad fontes*). Important temporal concepts deriving from the history of religions, such as eschatology, apocalyptic expectations etc., had a strong impact on the spreading of dynamic notions of time in Europe.

The spatial dimension: Traditions are bound to physical space—not only in the sense that they are often performed in specific local or regional contexts, but also in that “the image of handing down expresses physical proximity, immediacy—one hand should receive from another” (Adorno 1992, 75). As a result, **traditions are sensitive to dislocation, de-contextualization, gendering, and globalization**. Therefore, whenever a tradition is dislocated (e.g. through migration), it must find some way to allow its trans-localization (Glei and Jaspert 2016, 1–6). At times, traditions are strengthened (or construed in the first place) through translocation. In the Middle Ages, to give an example, gendered division of space conveyed ideological meaning, even as such divisions became a source of contention in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. [4]

The performative dimension: Traditions exist only in the mode of performative reference (recourse) and referential performance (execution). Performance deals with the oscillating unity of distinguished entities; in the case of tradition, e.g. between past and present times, between presence and absence, and between *tradent* (subject) und *traditum* (object) (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 17). Tradition is typically performed in ritual form, and rituals are parentally determined by tradition. Most importantly, traditions gain validity and authority through performance. In this sense, **traditions are necessarily self-referential** (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 24). During periods of social upheaval and migration, the identification, preservation, and performance of traditions become points of creativity, redefinition, and tension, as among early modern Jews when individuals and communities had to relocate and come to terms with foreign Jewish and non-Jewish customs (Cuffel 2016). [5]

The social dimension: Traditions aim at producing a sense of belonging. This is achieved through different forms of institutionalization, ranging from loose groups and occasional events via associations and movements to formal organizations. These social forms, in turn, operate in different social contexts, such as local, national, global, and diasporic ones, and sometimes bridge the difference between them. As part of the social dimension of traditions, it is also paramount to look at political, economic, and legal implications of traditions. For instance, traditions can be used to justify a socio-political order and to stabilize and legitimate political power. From an economic perspective, they potentially influence individuals' decisions on how to live, whether and how to work, and how and what to consume. [6]

The semantic dimension of tradition concerns the *traditum*, i.e. that which has been handed down: the content of a tradition. Even though traditions, from a research perspective, are always socially constructed and invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), **the recourse on them in empirical practice claims to be a matter of course**, self-evident and unavailable. The recourse on tradition thus typically endows the *traditum* with a special dignity. A major feature of traditions is that they must either conceal this constant contestation or portray the struggle against contestation and loss as successful. This, we assume, is achieved by means of a particular rhetoric, specific metaphors (e.g. thread, chain, etc.), and certain belief patterns [7]

that provide adherents of a tradition with orientation, but are labeled “legends” or “(political) myths” from outside a tradition.

The media dimension: Media of tradition are deeply connected with the spatial dimension. [8] They bring the *tradita* and the process of transmission into the close range of experience. Mass media—from cuneiform tablets to visual objects, manuscripts and books, and now electronic media—all help establish and spread traditions beyond oral transmission, but these media also influence them. The same holds true for material culture in general, e.g. specific places and spatial arrangements, buildings, memorials, and clothing. Some traditions may prefer specific media or even produce new media, including the skills necessary to make use of them. **Media and tradition have a reciprocal relationship.** They may produce one another, preserve one another, and even destroy one another. For example, it is a matter of much debate whether Protestantism brought about the success of the printing press or, on the contrary, the printing press produced Protestantism in the first place.

As inter- and intrareligious contact is paramount to the shape and development of traditions, [9] we invite contributors to *Entangled Religions* to engage with our understanding of tradition in one or more of the mentioned dimensions. Possible research questions include, but are not limited to:

- How do traditions bridge the difference between the past, the present, and the future? [10]
- How do traditions deal with processes of dislocation and relocation?
- How are different traditions represented in space, e.g. in city architecture?
- How do different traditions, sharing the same physical space, interact with each other?
- How do traditions gain authority through performance and how do they react when their authority is questioned?
- What is the language and rhetoric of tradition?
- Is the self-reference of tradition reflected on a metalinguistic level?
- Which media are preferred by which kind of tradition and vice versa?
- How do infrastructural and media conditions influence the content and the dynamics of traditions?

Relevant *Entangled Religions* Articles

Akasoy, Anna. 2019. “Islam and Buddhism: The Arabian Prequel?” *Entangled Religions* 8. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v8.2019.1-32>.

Panaino, Antonio. 2020. “Mazdeans and Christians Facing the End of the World: Circulations and Exchanges of Concepts.” *Entangled Religions* 11 (2). <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.11.2020.8441>.

Smith, Greg. 2018. “Evangelicals and the Encounter with Islam: Changing Christian Identity in Multi-Faith Britain.” *Entangled Religions* 5. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v5.2018.154-209>.

Solonin, Kirill. 2019. “Buddhism and Confucianism in the Tangut State.” *Entangled Religions* 8. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.8.2019.8472>.

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