Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe

Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives

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CONTACTS BETWEEN THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS DURING THEIR EXPANSION. AN INTRODUCTION

Nikolas Jaspert

At first glance, the contributions assembled in the second section of these proceedings might appear to be a chronological continuation of the first section's papers. But closer scrutiny should reveal that the articles not only advance in time, but also treat other issues than those dealt with in section one. Research in this block – and in the corresponding research field within the Käte-Hamburger Consortium "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" – is geared towards observing and comparing phenomena within the religious field that are affected by processes of expansion or that themselves have an impact upon such processes. The term expansion is hereby understood in the widest sense of the word, thus not only comprising political and military, but also economic or cognitive processes. Peaceful and antagonistic forms of interaction can and often do occur simultaneously, and developments are neither teleological nor as clear-cut as hindsight might suggest. Military, economic or intellectual expansion could and more often than not did have an effect on religious traditions: mission could bring about religious expansion; contact with hitherto unknown religions could lead to religious transfer. All such developments represented challenges to existing religious traditions, challenges which could meet with a diversity of responses: the consolidation of canonical texts, the establishment of orthodoxy, the emergence of deviance and heresy, of hermetical or popular religion. Such reactions, diversifications or condensations are the subject of the analyses that follow.

The papers assembled here have a wide geographical and chronological spectrum: the subjects addressed range from the ancient Near and Middle East to the medieval Mediterranean all the way to early modern Far East Asia. They study the impact expansionistic movements had in a series of fields: the first block concentrates on the social and intellectual effects of military expansion, the second on the consequences that economic expansion could have on the intellectual field of political philosophy; and finally, our third block will be closely centred

on the religious field, more precisely on monastic history. In different ways and to different degrees, all these articles touch upon aspects of religious transfer and expansion that the researchers cooperating in Bochum believe to be of central relevance. Six such "sets of questions", they could also be termed "transversal issues" or even "denominators of religious expansion", have been identified and elaborated during the first two years of the consortium's work.[1] Evidently, these sets of questions have fuzzy borders and overlap to a certain degree, but such an attempt to categorize the analysis of religious expansion may prove to be a helpful heuristic instrument. Indeed, the articles that comprise the following section of these proceedings have proven to be an effective test as to these denominators' validity and value.

1. *Six Fields of Research into Religious Expansion*

A first major issue in the study of religious expansion and transfer appears to be the relationship between expansion and governance. To what degree did the expansion of religious traditions depend on the existence of political power, are proximity and distance to power relevant criteria for the study of the expansion of religious ideas? German scholarship, particularly medievalism, has extensively elaborated the concept of "Herrschaftsnähe" and "Herrschaftsferne" – proximity to power versus distance to power – over the past decades,[2] though its implications for the religious field have not been sufficiently accentuated. To what extent did the activity of governing influence religious transfer, and under which conditions could shifts of religious semantics for their part affect political settings? More importantly still: were such shifts the result of inter-religious contact and transfer? And finally: under which conditions and with the help of which media did religions expand below the level of stately or political structures? This transversal issue is notably historical by nature; it lies at the interface between comparative religious studies and historical studies.

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[1] My thanks go to all members of research field 2 within the consortium "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe", particularly Christian Frevel, Reinhold Glei, Jason Neelis, Jörg Plassen and Amy Remensnyder, whose thoughts and comments I have attempted to incorporate into this summary.

[2] On the concept of "Herrschernähe" and "Herrscherferne" cf. the pertinent studies by Peter Moraw, *Über König und Reich. Aufsätze zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte des späten Mittelalters,* Sigmaringen 1995.

A second understanding of religious expansion deals with the phenomenon from the perspective of alterity and xenology by studying both the perception and the treatment of the alien and unknown. The questions and themes raised through this field of research have been widely formulated in recent studies and are in no way reduced to processes of othering and restriction, but also include forms of adaptation and modification.[3] It is well known that the spectrum of possible dealings with the alien ranges from inclusion und accommodation to assimilation und exclusion right up to segregation und extermination. The same holds true for the religiously "other". This perspective can easily be extended by picking up on "theories of recognition"[4] and analysing the relationship between religious contact and recognition, or by studying the interdependencies between religious contacts and ethical identity. It might also be extended by analysing the practical operating level of religious expansion, which implies studying such phenomena as mission and conversion.

Considering expansion's inherently spatial dimension it is hardly surprising that a third set of questions is strongly marked by concepts of space. Geographical areas can be defined locally, but they can also be seen as transit zones of encounter and transfer from a wider perspective. Here, interface zones such as borderlands become particularly important. As recent historical research into medieval frontiers has shown, these were by no means barriers alone, but also functioned as areas of intensified exchange.[5] In fact, areas deemed peripheral from a political perspective were often very central from the viewpoint of religious transfer processes. This insight is activated by the research consortium "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" in order to better understand and analyse processes of religious transfer. In extension of the frontier zones, one might also ana-

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[3] Cf. Herbers, Klaus/Jaspert, Nikolas (eds.) *Eigenes und Fremdes in den deutsch-spanischen Beziehungen des späten Mittelalters* (Geschichte und Kultur der Iberischen Welt 1), Münster – Berlin 2004; Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach, ed. Gerd Baumann/Andre Gingrich (The EASA series 3), New York 2004 (with references to the scientific debate).

[4] Honneth, Axel, *Kampf um Anerkennung: zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*, Frankfurt am Main 1992; Honneth, Axel, *Verdinglichung: eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie*, Frankfurt am Main 2005.

[5] The discussion is synthesized in: Power, Daniel/Standen, Naomi, Houndmills [et al.] (eds.), *Frontiers in question: Eurasian borderlands 700–1700*, 1999; Herbers, Klaus/Jaspert, Nikolas (eds.), *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich. Der Osten und der Westen des mittelalterlichen Lateineuropa* (Europa im Mittelalter, Abhandlungen und Beiträge zur historischen Komparatistik 9), Berlin 2007.

lyse the functioning and the effects of inter-religious networks. The
network concept effectively complements the frontier paradigm as it
does not concentrate on extended surface areas of contact but rather
considers focal points and their position within larger communication
systems.[6] Despite the undeniable heuristic value of frontier and net-
work studies for the analysis of religious expansion, any study of spaces
of religious transfer cannot limit its attention to the literal meaning of
the word, that is to the investigation of geographic areas in a physical
sense alone. It must also take into consideration the cognitive dimen-
sion that religious concepts of space can possess. Consequently, the
degree to which physical space could and can be symbolically charged
deserves particular attention, for shifts and changes such symbolic
focal points underwent due to processes of expansion could trigger
wide societal reactions in the religious field. To give an example: the
notion of the Holy Land or the Holy City played a major role for
Judaism, Islam and Christianity alike, and the fall of such symbolically
charged places could have an enormous impact in theology and philoso-
phy, liturgy and ritual, literature and the arts.

A fourth denominator enquires about the concrete settings and proc-
esses of religious transfer, that is, we ask which models of contact and
exchange are observable when religious traditions enter into contact
due to processes of expansion. The interplay between the institutions
and semantics of religious traditions is of great relevance to this set
of questions. That means one must focus on forms in which religious
semantics and their practical specificities interacted or interact. This
not only implies describing the many forms of selection and adapta-
tion of religious knowledge and practices discernable – ranging from
complete rejection to assimilation and finally hybridization –, but also
uncovering the reciprocal relationship between religious semantics and
religious institutionalization. As such processes of institutionalization
are always set in a wider context, it is important to consider exogenous
catalysts such as the economy, science, violence, culture and learning,
all of which could both promote or impede inter-religious transfer.
Such a wider understanding of the factors influencing religious trans-
fer – including antagonistic forms of religious interaction – is neces-
sary, not least in order to counteract a tendency inherent to the study
of cultural transfer in general, that is the tendency to affirm the com-

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[6] Vásquez, Manuel A., "Studying Religion in Motion: A Networks Approach", in:
Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 20 (2008), 151–184.

municative and ultimately harmonious aspects of interfaith relations while setting aside phenomena of inequality and resistance.

Processes of religious systematization form the fifth transversal issue, for after their constitutional phase, religious traditions tend not only to define themselves, but also to define others. This occurs particularly often in the wake of expansionistic movements and the interfaith contacts these entail. Such processes of systematization can be brought about in several ways: intra-religiously by normative texts, jurisdiction and canon, inter-religiously by categorization, apologetics and polemics. Learned religious experts and religious institutions contributed substantially to such attempts to systematize one's own as well as alien belief-systems. But systematization is not only a phenomenon related to othering and demarcation, but also marks processes of adaptation and hybridization, of transplantation, transmission and transformation. First, alien attempts at systematization can lead to a reflection and redefinition of one's own perspective, as inter-textual relationships illustrate. Second, processes of adaptation and hybridization within religious traditions can trigger fresh attempts to understand and define these novel developments within one's own belief-system. Systematization is thus an ongoing process which must consequently be studied diachronically.

The field of systematization lies at the interface between inter and intra-religious transfer. The latter is important for the sixth and last denominator I would like to present. It deals with institutions created as a result of reform initiatives and heterodox movements, for phases of expansion often went hand in hand with deviance and reform. The emergence of new forms of religious, regular life (for example the foundation of new religious orders), or the development of mechanisms to define and persecute practices considered aberrant are examples of such developments. In both cases we are dealing with phenomena that did not mark the constitutional phase of religious traditions as much as later periods characterized by consolidation and expansion. More often than not, such processes of institutionalization were the result of prior, more fluid phenomena such as changes in devotional practice or flows of ideas and semantics; both such underlying currents and their consolidation in the form of specific institutions require our attention. The analysis of intra-religious institutionalization consequently considers both horizontal forms of contacts between major religious traditions as well as vertical forms of intra-faith relations.

A fundamental axiom of the six set of questions expounded above is the conviction that endogenous and exogenous vectors of religious

transfer are interdependent. Consequently any research into trans-
fer processes must take both semantic and institutional aspects, both
religious thought and religious practice into account – without losing
sight of the societal conditions into which the religious field is embed-
ded.

2. *Dynamic Nodes and Push-Factors*

On a functional level, one of the major issues to address in order to
comprehend the relationship between expansion and transfer of reli-
gious ideas is to understand exactly how and through which channels
religious ideas tend to spread. The picture of gradual diffusion based on
the assumption that religious ideas expanded owing to point to point
contact has recently been criticized, among others by Erik Zürcher and
Jason Neelis.[7] Neelis claims that the expansion of religions resulted
from a more complex process of transplantation, transmission and
transformation based on nodes of interaction that were intercon-
nected by capillary routes. Such dynamic nodes – or "hubs" – in which
religious traditions meet, interact and mutually influence each other
deserve special attention.

The concept of hubs which initially pertains to the field of logistics
and communication technologies has recently been applied to network
theory and could also prove to be fruitful for research on religious
transfer.[8] A differentiation has been proposed between "passive hubs"
that simply serve as a conduit for transfer, and "intelligent" or "man-
ageable hubs" that monitor the traffic passing through them. Applied
to our field of studies and understood in a general sense, such nodes
could and can take differing forms: places, institutions, individuals and
groups, but also intellectual currents or literary genres can be termed
hubs in such a functional sense. For needless to say, these spatial met-

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[7] Zürcher, Erik: "Buddhism Across Boundaries: The Foreign Input", in: *Buddhism
Across Boundaries – Chinese Buddhism and the Western Regions: Collection of Essays
1993,* ed. John McRae/Jan Nattier, Tapei 1999, 1–59; Zürcher, Erik: *The Buddhist
Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China,*
3rd ed. (Sinica Leidensia 11), Leiden 2007; cf. Neelis, Jason, *Early Buddhist Transmis-
sion and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyound the Nortwestern
Borderlands of South Asia,* Leiden, Boston: Brill 2011.

[8] Examples of modern applications: Taylor, Philip: *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage
and Popular Religion in Vietnam*, Honolulu 2004; Gopin, Marc: *To Make the Earth
Whole: Citizen Diplomacy in the Age of Religious Militancy,* Lanham 2009.

aphors are not only geared towards describing physical, but also to describing intellectual and semantic space.

Focusing on the religious expansion from a historical perspective, the wide range of hubs of religious transfer can be divided into four groups. Basically, one can distinguish nodes of power such as courts etc., nodes of learning and knowledge such as universities, madrasas etc., nodes of economy, such as trading emporia, major trading towns etc., and nodes of worship such as centres of pilgrimage, cemeteries, monasteries etc. What all these dynamic centres of interaction have in common is that they often served as points of religious transfer. Certainly, several nodes or hubs evade classification and belong to different types at once. But then again, such an attempt at classification might improve the concept as an analytical tool.

While religious expansion was undoubtedly facilitated by nodes and hubs, it was also actively advanced by driving forces. The role that pull-factors such as the attraction of religious traditions played for the latter's consolidation has been dealt upon elsewhere in this publication and within the consortium.[9] But expansion of religious traditions was by no means due to pull-factors alone: push-factors also played a part that need not be underestimated. Such push-factors could take manifold forms, the most notable of which being mission. As is well known, mission is a much debated issue, claims being that it has historically led to acculturation, westernization, cultural destruction etc., but without a doubt, attempts to proselytize individuals or entire peoples was one – and historically not the least important – way of expanding religious traditions. Modern missiology has underlined that processes of conversion are both active and passive: the mindsets of those missionized were situated in a wide spectrum ranging from acceptance, adaptation and modification to repulsion. Furthermore, one should bear in mind that territorial expansion does not necessarily go hand in hand with mission, as the mediaeval Crusader States or the Iberian Peninsular in the Middle Ages demonstrate. This is not the place to determine under which conditions expansion and mission coincide or to define the relation between push- and pull-factors during such processes. Instead, I would like to turn to a second example in order to

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[9] Cf. Peter Wick's contribution above in this volume p. 73.

illustrate the importance of push-factors for the expansion of religious ideas: the relocation of sacred places.[10]

From a comparative, historical perspective, the basic condition for expanding religions does not seem to be local stability, but spatial dynamics. Apparently religions have the inherent tendency not only to transcend local borders while maintaining a cultic epicentre, but also to dis- and translocate the very centre itself. Examples of this phenomenon are multiple and range from the relocation of the Trojan cult of the Penates to Italy by Aeneas, to the Exodus or the Babylonian exile in the case of Judaism all the way to Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina and the Prophet's night trip to Jerusalem. Equally, the transfer of the imperial residence from Rome to Byzantium (and later to Moscow), actually a *translatio imperii*, must also be understood as a *translatio religionis*. Apart from such major translocations, the countless minor ones must also be taken into account, for instance the translocation of relics in the Christian Middle Ages, which could turn previously unimportant places into centres of pilgrimages. Changes of sacred place may in retrospect thus often be understood as a trigger for internal leaps within the history of religious traditions. Last but not least, the fictional translocation of holy places should also be considered: the list ranges from the Islands of the Blessed to Atlantis to the Heavenly Jerusalem.

To sum up, both dynamic nodes of religious transfer such as monasteries, courts or centres of education and push-factors such as mission or the translocation of sacred places facilitated and enhanced the expansion of religious ideas both within and between Europe and Asia.

3. *Six Articles in a Grid*

The set of questions expounded above are the result of collaborative work within the research field 2 of the consortium "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe". The articles that follow provide an opportunity to test their validity. Indeed, every contribution touches on some or even all of the issues elaborated in the course of our work, as a brief overview should suffice to illustrate.

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[10] The following paragraph summarizes thoughts developed and expounded by Reinhold Glei in November 2009 during meetings of Research Field 2: Contacts between the major religious traditions during their expansion.

Our first set of questions on the relationship between governance and religious expansion plays a pivotal role in several articles. Michael Lecker deals with expansion in its most concrete and physical form: military conquest. He underlines the importance exogenous factors such as war had upon religious groups by describing the immediate social impact that the change from Christian to Muslim rule as a result of the Islamic expansion had upon the Jewish populace of the Near East. For subdued Jews, "Herrschaftsnähe" is shown to have been important in a very elementary sense. Stephen Berkwitz, in contrast, uses the example of Sri Lanka and South Asia to show that the success of Theravāda Buddhism in these regions depended to an absolutely essential degree on royal power and patronage, an analysis very much corroborated by Sven Bretfeld through his study of Buddhist expansion in Tibet. "The Theravāda ideology of righteous kings whose great merit is evidenced by their royal position and reinforced by the patronage of orthodox Buddhist institutions made this form of Buddhism appealing to Burmese and Thai monarchs" (Berkwitz). Finally, Eun-jeung Lee uses the reception of Confucianism by some Western thinkers to illustrate how new theories of governance could be formulated as a result of intercultural contact.

How the religiously "other" was dealt with in concrete terms is touched upon in Michael Lecker's and John Tolan's contributions, which both deal with the religious push-factor conversion and the effect it had upon Jewish and Christian communities during the early Middle Ages. Fear of conversion had an important impact on some learned Christian authors' views of Islam and also had a retroactive effect upon the understanding of their own religion, thus causing reactions not only in the social and juridical, but also in the intellectual and theological fields. Stephen Berkwitz in turn underlines, "that Buddhism originated in Gangetic Plains of India and spread across Asia as arguably the world's first missionary religion" and illustrates this through the example of Mahinda's activities in Sri Lanka, which included large-scale preaching.

The spatial dimension of religious expansion, or more concretely, the importance of political borderlands as transit zones and that of religious hubs as dynamic nodes of transfer comes to the fore in many papers. The success of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was facilitated by the fact that the island was geographically divided from the heartlands of Brahmanism. John Tolan's examples illustrate that intellectual grappling with Islam on the part of Christian scholars occurred at the

periphery of the Dār al-Islām, and Michael Lecker's example of Jewish garrisons left in newly conquered frontier zones as the sole representatives of Islam helps put simplistic notions of clearly divided religious entities into proper perspective. Eun-jeung Lee's contribution is an enlightening study into the repercussions inter-religious contact at the periphery had within the heartlands of European Christianity, whereas Michael Lackner underlines the fact that according to a sinocentric understanding of East Asia, China was the centre and Korea the periphery of the civilized world, which in turn had effects on the acceptance of western religions in Asia. Professor Lackner also points to the fact that the distance between Asia and Europe resulted in filtering tactics within Jesuit writings about Asia and the beliefs of its peoples.

The respective settings and processes of religious transfer are described by Michael Lecker, John Tolan, Sven Bretfeld and Eun-jeung Lee. Michael Lecker's paper raises the question of whether slavery can be seen as a vector for religious dynamics, as it necessarily produced contact situations on the micro-level of society. John Tolan's rendering of Christian thinkers' attitudes toward Islam shows perfectly how contemporary phenomena such as political expansion were fitted into theological views of the past and the future. The scholars conveyed religious knowledge and prejudice to co-religionists by selecting, adapting and more often than not distorting Islamic beliefs. Institutional settings and push factors such as economic pressure (taxes etc.) triggered fear of conversion, which in turn led to religious apologetics and ultimately to a new understanding of one's own religion. In the case of Sri Lanka, the competition between different transmission lineages of Buddhism in turn led to a condensation of this religious tradition on the island. And the tributary status of Chŏson versus China and the state of Chŏson society in general lay at the heart of Chŏng Yag-yong's egalitarian understanding of religious rites (Lee).

Processes of systematization were the basis of several contributions. The condensation of varying forms of Buddhism into a Theravāda ideology in Sri Lanka can be seen in this light, just as the standardization of canonical texts by Mahāvihārin monks (Stephen Berkwitz), and even more so the translations and the creation of a particular genre of writing in Tibet as described by Sven Bretfeld. This "three-vow" literature was an attempt to systematize divergences between Tibetan Buddhist transmissions and effectively not only helped consolidate Buddhism within Tibet, but also served as a starting point for the expansion of

Buddhism to Mongolia and China. Eun-jeung Lee's rendering of Chŏng Yag-yong's reception of Western science illustrates the way in which different schools of learning attempted to systematize and homologate Western religion and Confucian thought. In turn, John Tolan's article is itself no less than a systematization of historical attempts to systematize religions. His four overlapping phases of Christian intellectual reactions to Muslim expansion are based on polemic or apologetic texts that more often than not are examples of systematic demarcation and a reflection of the authors' own beliefs.

Intra-religious reform is dealt with extensively by Stephen Berkwitz and to a lesser degree by John Tolan and Eun-jeung Lee. The rise of rival orders and reform movements had a major impact on Lankan Buddhism and ultimately led to its condensation (Berkwitz). Inner-Christian deviance and its persecution provided the backdrop for an interpretation of Islam as a heretical strain of Christianity, as John Tolan lays out. Finally, Eun-jeung Lee presents a particularly intriguing case of Chŏng Yag-yong's missionary zeal clothed in the garb of alleged inner-Chinese reform. But on a comparative level, the authors of this volume take an intra-religious perspective to a much lesser degree than an inter-religious viewpoint, which very much correlates with the work of the entire consortium.

Let us turn from our set of questions to our two examples for means and agents of religious transfers, that is hubs and push-factors. Stephen Berkwitz's and Sven Bretfeld's contributions underline the importance of monastic hubs for the expansion of religious ideas in Asia. Buddhism expanded to Sri Lanka not through point-to-point diffusion as a gradual spread, but rather punctually via monasteries. In very much the same way, Sri Lanka and Tibet served as a point of acceleration for the expansion of Buddhism in South and South East Asia. Sven Bretfeld uses the term "cultural relay" to describe this phenomenon and underlines that such relays could act as cultural filters by monitoring and changing the traffic passing through them, thus effectively functioning as "intelligent hubs". In Sri Lanka, for example, Buddhism was condensed into one understanding of this religious tradition, whereas Tibet on the contrary acted as an "intelligent hub" by conveying a decidedly diversified notion of Buddhism and by systematizing it. On a less spatial and more cognitive level, John Tolan presents an important literary hub in the form of apologetic texts of the early and High Middle Ages. This genre not only condensed religious knowledge and

prejudice, but also accelerated their diffusion among scholarly elites and less learned groups of society.

The relationship between push-factors and pull-factors is nicely exemplified by an extract from Theodore Abû Qurrah's writings on Islam presented by John Tolan. Abû Qurrah ascribed the expansion of Islam to the military and political power of its adherents and thus to push-factors alone, whereas Christianity allegedly spread far and wide thanks to pull-factors, namely due to its religionists' desire for God and for extra-worldly merit. Sven Bretfeld, in turn, outlines the "meritorious surplus" that acceptance of foreign understandings of Buddhism entailed in Tibet, thus illustrating the reciprocal nature of push and pull factors. Eun-jeung Lee and Michael Lackner deal with examples of the ways in which Asian terms and concepts were adapted by Matteo Ricci and Chŏng Yag-yong in order to further Christian expansion. As for the translocation of sacred places, such processes are discerned in the Middle East, in South and in East Asia. Michael Lecker uses his close reading of Jewish capitulation treaties in order to demonstrate the mechanisms behind the appropriation of sacred places on the part of Muslim invaders. Stephen Berkwitz describes how promoters of Buddhism appropriated and de-centred local spirits and their cults, and Theravāda Buddhism later strengthened its authority both by appropriation of local sites and via the transmission of relics throughout South East Asia. By the same token, the localization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka can also be seen as a particular form of translocation, namely as an attempt to tie a tradition to its immediate social and cultural environment.

The articles assembled in this section thus help illustrate the imbrications between exogenous and endogenous factors of religious expansion. They highlight the concrete settings that accelerated or impeded such forms of transfer – be it patronage, institutional consolidation or active propagation – and define the effect such movements had upon different religious traditions – for example in the form of systematization or adaptation. Further research within the consortium "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" will strive to pinpoint more precisely this intricate interdependency between context and contents of religious transfer processes.