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Religion, Tradition and the Popular in Asia and Europe. Judith Schlehe, Institut für Ethnologie, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 08.11.2012-10.11.2012.

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Religion, Tradition and the Popular in Asia and Europe

From November 8th to November 10th, 2012 the conference "Religion, Tradition and the Popular" was held at Freiburg University. The conference was organized by the anthropologist Judith Schlehe and other members of the Freiburg DFG research group 875 "History in Popular Cultures of Knowledge" dealing with the "popularization of history", a contemporary development to be observed in different cultures all over the world. In the conference papers the emphasis was placed on Western Europe and Southeast and East Asia. Amongst the conference's aims was a deconstruction of the old dichotomy of East and West and the application of a transnational, interdisciplinary approach.

Nowadays the dichotomous construct of a "modern, secularized" West and a "premodern, religious" South or East cannot be maintained. On a global scale one can observe a return of both the religious, as well as the "popular" and "paranormal". This is deeply connected to people's longing for the vernacular, more personal integration, more concrete experience and participation in response to an increasingly global, anonymous world. The key question of the conference was how traditional religious concepts and institutions are affected and renewed by such trends of popularization. In this context the "popular" (or one should perhaps better use the term "popularized") is no longer seen as an ephemeral phenomenon, reduced to the interests of the "folk", the lower, uneducated social strata. Rather it is a new "fuzzy" cognitive paradigm, typical of a new global middle class intentionally playing with eclecticism, syncretism, media, entertainment, commerce and so on. Such new trends become especially provocative and problematic within the traditional realm of religion. Should popularization be seen as a new potential for (global/local) identities, a broadening and pluralization of traditional religious thinking, or is it a trivialization of the latter? Are concepts of "better"/"worse" still relevant, or do we need a fundamental "reframing of categories"?

Following the sociologist HUBERT KNOBLAUCH (Berlin), during the last decades a remarkable hype of spirituality has taken place in Europe. Outside the petrified structures of conventional churches, diverse spiritual interests (meditation, healing, organic and ecological modes of living and so on), are sought to satisfy people's need for a vivid, concrete transcendent experience of "feeling one with the universe". No longer marginal, "alternative" phenomena, they have become mainstream. Knoblauch states a significant transition from "alternative" to "popular" religion. This new kind of spirituality does not necessarily constitute a competition for traditional religion. Rather there occurs something like a crossing of borders, a merging of new, popular and traditional religious practices.

In Southeast Asia, the popularization of religion - in the sense of a syncretic, open attitude - has long since been a characteristic feature. The historian ANTHONY REID (Canberra) traces this back to historical experience. In reaction to Islamization during the 16th century, in the 18th century many Southeast Asian peoples developed a kind of "syncretic marriage between formal Islam and the power of the spirits". In this way the vernacular, traditional was "constructed" as a kind of weapon or defense in confrontation with the world religion of Islam.

This seems to be a successful strategy in dealing with religious and social restraints till today. In his paper the cultural scientist ARIEL HERYANTO (Canberra) showed that in present Indonesia besides official Islam there exists, a new form of popular Islamism (the so called "Post"-Islamism) especially attracting urban middle-class youth. The term should not be misunderstood, because Post-Islamism is not a secular movement, it tries to combine Islam with a modern, individualistic, democratic way of life. The post-Islamic movement is especially strong in the sphere of popular culture, for example film.

Conference organizer JUDITH SCHLEHE (Freiburg) reported on her field research on the so-called "paranor-

mal" practitioners in Indonesia. These popular, magical-mystical experts mostly practice in urban contexts using elements of various religions. They offer healing or the satisfaction of everyday needs to people of whatever social and ethnic origin, gender, religion etcetera. They themselves belong to different religions. Some of them are ethnic Chinese which is of special significance because in Indonesia Chinese people suffered from suppression for a long time. Judith Schlehe argues, that the practice of the "paranormal" can be interpreted as cultural translation and as a counter-discourse against increasing religious fundamentalism and intolerance. But Schlehe also admits, that the "paranormal" are still a marginal social phenomenon.

The studies on the *klenteng* (Chinese temple) Sam Poo Kong in Semarang (Java), carried out by the anthropologist EVAMARIA MÜLLER (Freiburg), show that the coexistence of different religious traditions often is not as harmonious and pluralistic as it seems. The history of the temple indeed is a multicultural one, but mostly it is a history of power struggle between Islam and Confucianism, a "one after another/against the other", not a "side-by-side" of different cultures and religions. Curiously the main reason, why the temple is accepted as a multicultural place today seems to be a commercial one. Multiculturalism "sells", not only in a symbolic, political meaning, but also in a concrete commercial one: members of different cultural and social backgrounds, not only amongst the leading political circles, can make money out of it, and so it is a commercial interest that unites people. But as soon as religious and social "hard-core" matters are concerned, there occur new conflicts.

PATTANA KITIARSA (Singapore) gave one of his last talks, as he passed away shortly after the conference. His research field was Thai popular culture. He spoke on Theravada-Buddhism as an important form of popular religion in Thailand. Theravada Buddhism is a syncretic mix of Buddhism, folk Brahmanism and spirit belief. This popular religion is completely independent from the state. There are no institutions, the main purpose is the satisfaction of everyday needs and the constant longing of people for health, luck, wealth. Theravada-Buddhism is often used for lottery games which are very popular in Thailand. For Theravada-Buddhism there seems to be no contradiction between religious, personal and commercial aims. On the contrary: Commercial aspects and economic needs are so important that, according to Kitiarsa, it seems to be appropriate to use Max Weber's view of religion (in a reconsidered and modified way) as a theoretical and methodological base of research.

The - holy or unholy - marriage of religion and commerce was also a main topic in the study on the use of Christian symbols and semantics in commercial advertisement presented by the religion scholar ANNA-KATHARINA HÖPFLINGER (Zürich). This was the only paper dealing with the popularization of Christianity in the Western world. At first sight the religious function of Christian semantics seems to be eliminated, as projected in well-known promotional clips, for example when John Malkovich (as God) sells the mercy of living on to a man (George Clooney) for a Nespresso machine. As far as the "encoders", the producers of such commercial clips, are concerned, the message is clear: a wealthy educated urban clientele, while enjoying an aesthetic game with religious subjects and the déjà vu-effect, should be persuaded to purchase the products. But the "decoding" of the advertising messages is far more complex and polysemous than the encoding. On the one hand true "faith Christians" don't accept the commercial and aesthetic use of religious topics. On the other hand there's no doubt that while traditional religious semantics are deconstructed by commercial use, new semantics evolve and religious everyday knowledge is "fed" with new concepts and ideas. It is a mutual process of "media using religion" and "religion using media". Höpflinger speaks of a "fuzzy" religion.

New media also play an important role in "microblog Christianity" in China, examined by the sinologist KRISTINE KUPFER (Freiburg). Sina Weibo is a social networking service, with which one can find a lot of users referring to themselves as Christians without fearing discrimination. However, most of these users are "tag Christians", not "faith Christians" - a young urban generation using Christian symbols and topics in a syncretic way to create a new life-style or to express existential feelings and emotions. Of course it's difficult to say, if there are comparable Christian activities in the "offline"-sphere, but even if this is not the case, "online"-Christianity forms a world in itself and creates its own dynamics.

In the lecture of media scientist EHLER VOSS (Leipzig), the focus was on the role of the development of media and media concepts in the changing of religious views in Europe. Today most people think of media as technical achievements of mankind. But in the 19th century the term medium referred to a person who had special cognitive abilities, whose mind was perceived to be open to the world of spirits and thus able to "mediate" between reality and the other world. Even then the crucial question was, if the medium is really just a kind of "channel" for external forces, or if he/she him/herself "creates" the message (be it consciously or unconsciously) in ac-

cordance with the expectations of the clients. Even today a medium is only accepted as "authentic", if there exist clear proof that he/she is not "cheating" - a curious remnant of 19th century essentialism and the belief in the "objectivity" of science. Voss makes a bold connection between the "human" version of the medium-message problem and Marshall McLuhans famous statement that "The medium is the message" referring to technical media.

Two papers dealt with neopagan religious movements in the West, especially the cult of Asatru, the northern Germanic Gods. RENÉ GRÜNDER (Freiburg), a sociologist cooperating with the Freiburg Institute of Parapsychology, showed that the time when the cult of the Germanic Gods was considered an exclusive domain of right-wing extremists is long gone. During the last decades there has been a vigorous development of neopaganism, coinciding with an incorporation of influences from various social discourses, such as feminism, folk, ecology etc. Today it is a manifold movement, supported by members of the middle and upper classes who are longing for new concrete transcendent experiences beyond the limits of the well-established Christian institutions. The revival of pagan polytheism can be seen as a reaction to a "polyvalent world culture" and as a "chance of dealing with the complexity of modern societies". While Nordic neopaganism is still a marginal phenomenon, it has become a fashion trend (neopaganist weddings, funerals etc.), which can also be observed in Eastern Europe and even in Romance-speaking Europe.

From the lecture of the literary scholar STEPHANIE VON SCHNURBEIN (Berlin) it became clear how Nordic neopaganism as a religious surrogate could be considered problematic. Von Schnurbein looked back to the historic roots of this quasi-religious movement in the early 19th century. The beginning of the enthusiasm for northern mythology coincides with the romantic debates on the aestheticization of religion, i.e. it was an art-religion, an apparent intellectual construction from the very beginning (Wagner, Nietzsche and so on). Of course the construction of myths is a fascinating thing, but it is also a dangerous, paradoxical venture. It contradicts the concept of the myth as something original, authentic, eternal and irrespective of human wit. Everything produced by art keeps the unpleasant aftertaste of artificiality and arbitrariness. Another problem is the fatal interference of the aesthetic and the political/ethical, which is a persistent undercurrent in northern mythology (for example in the black metal scene).

Short upshot: While in South East Asia new forms of popular "fuzzy" religion - in spite of their current contestation - are rooted in a long, vivid tradition of the syncretic, the merging of elements of different religions or the merging of religion with other social discourses seems to be problematic in many Western countries. Nevertheless, the change of religious concepts can be seen as part of a broader global process of shifting cognitive attitudes and modes of knowledge. This process seems to be promoted and shaped by the specific conditions of new media communication, which "create" a new type of globally connected youth. This generation has subsequently become accustomed to a broad, syncretic model of knowledge. They transcend the boundaries of established social subsystems and discourses while combining spheres of life once considered incompatible, for example the classical boundaries between the realms of religion/ethics, commerce and the aesthetic. Though the different forms of popular religion in itself often seem to be marginal, together they constitute a mainstream phenomenon, expressing a strong need for a new kind of transcendence which people can experience in a concrete way and which is directly connected to their personal wishes and aims. In this sense, forms of popular/popularized culture are no longer bound to certain social and local strata, but contribute towards a new universal Weltanschauung.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: The Conceptualization of Popular Religion

Hubert Knoblauch (Berlin): Popular Spirituality

Panel 2: Popular Religions and the Construction of History

Anthony Reid (Canberra): Synthesizing Global and Local Religious Systems in Early Modern Southeast Asia

Ehler Voss (Leipzig): Past and Present of Mediumship in Europe

Panel 3: Popular Religions and the Media

Kristin Kupfer (Freiburg): Blogging for Souls? Conceptualizing Christianity in Chinese Microblogs

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger (Zürich): "Tomorrow, Christ on the Cross will be Selling Socks." The Reception of Religion in Contemporary Advertisement Campaigns

Ariel Heryanto (Canberra): Cinematic Contest of Popular Post-Islamism

Panel 4: Popular Religions and the Market

Evamaria Müller (Freiburg): Sam Poo Kong in Semarang - A Contested Place of Worship

Pattana Kitiarsa (Singapore): Of Weber and the Real Religion of the Masses: The Making of Modern Popular Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand

Panel 5: Popular Religions and the Combination of Traditions

Judith Schlehe (Freiburg): Translating Traditions and Transcendence: Everyday Needs and Paranormal Practice in Indonesia

Panel 6: Popular Religion in Europa: Neo Paganism

René Gründer (Freiburg): Neopagan Traditions in the 21st century: Re-inventing Polytheism in a Polyvalent World-Culture

Stephanie von Schnurbein (Berlin): Germanic Neo-Paganism - A Nordic Art-Religion

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