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# The Task and Function of the Academic Study of Religions in the Face of Religious Diversity

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## Introduction

Religious harmony, plurality or diversity... What do we mean if we talk about the diversity or plurality of religions? What is religious harmony and what is religious diversity? Do these terms describe different situations or is it just a different perspective on the same phenomena?

Is harmony the difficult but successful balance between religious minorities and majorities? And does diversity mean the mixture of different religious denominations, customs, practices and symbols – some dominating, the others marginalised? Do these terms describe the same phenomena? What is the correct description of these situations and processes we all know from our own experience in daily life?

When we travel around the world or even when we look around the cities and places where we live, we will find expressions of different religions and cultures side by side nearly everywhere. For example I belong to a Christian denomination, my neighbour is a Muslim, a student of mine is a Buddhist monk, and I like to eat in an Indian restaurant nearby whose owner is a Sikh. In Germany people discuss whether the high minaret of the new mosque will disturb the Christian neighbourhood and how religious education in public schools could be arranged for both Christian and Muslim children and also for those children who do not belong to any denomination at all.

In Indonesia you find the large Istiqlal Mosque in the centre of Jakarta on the opposite side of the road from a Roman Catholic Cathedral; and in North Jakarta I have visited a protestant church and a mosque side by side, so close that they are almost under one and the same roof.

In a Chinese temple/*klenteng* in Semarang you find a special room for Muslim prayers, and in the area of the tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon there is a place for Chinese ancestor-veneration. We could very easily add further examples to illustrate the presence of different religious denominations in our surroundings. It is interesting to see that there are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in Christian dominated Germany, while you have Christians, Buddhists and Hindus in Muslim dominated Indonesia. In fact, in

most of today's societies we find a colourful religious landscape. Often it is shaped by a majority of one or two major religions and a greater or lesser variety of small denominations and religious orientations, groups and systems, sometimes identifying specific social minorities.

There is not enough time to speak about the reasons for the increasing variety of religious orientations within modern societies. However, three of the most important factors may be briefly mentioned: migration, economic globalisation and internationalisation, and the unimpeded access to information by means of the world wide web or internet. All of these factors intensify the bringing together of people from different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. We all know about the problems and the conflicts, as well as the opportunities accompanied and produced by this situation. It is evident that structures and strategies are required for mutual understanding and for living together within and between different societies.

Before I come to talk about the specific task and function of the academic study of religions in this process, I would like to point out one quite frequent misunderstanding. Sometimes the impression arises that the existence of religiously and culturally pluralistic societies and the problematics associated with them are typical of modern times only – but even a brief look back into history will correct this. For instance we have a variety of religious orientations existing during classical Roman antiquity, we find different denominations within the Mongolian empire in the fourteenth century in Central Asia and we can observe the growth of conflicts and fears between Christians and Muslims during the siege and fall of Constantinople in the fifteenth century. Just as today, people in these long distant situations were confronted with competing and divergent belief systems and had to cope with the emotions of strangeness and fear. It is not surprising that in all of these historical cases we find various initiatives and strategies for handling the emerging conflicts.

The Mongolian rulers, for example, in spite of the priority of Buddhism, granted freedom of religious practice for Christians and Muslims and supported public religious debates between the representatives of different religions (Kollmar-Paulenz 2005). And to take another example, directly after the taking of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II, Nicholas of Cusa (Nicolaus Cusanus/Nikolaus von Kues: 1401–1464), cardinal bishop of Brixen (Austria) wrote a work entitled "*De pace fidei*" (in 1453). His intention was to underline the unity of different religions (especially Islam and Christianity) and therefore the necessity of a dialogue between representatives and religious leaders from various denominations. Nicholas of Cusa is widely regarded as a forerunner of current interreligious dialogues and activities (Euler 2003, 224ff.), although of course the dialogues arranged in Mongolia were earlier.

These two examples alone show that neither the conflicts of religious diversity nor the necessity of mutual understanding and communication are new or confined to modern times only.

Maybe we may regard this conference as a further, contemporary attempt to bring together scientists or scholars who not only have different academic subjects, but also various cultural backgrounds and religious identities, thus seeing it in some sense as standing in the tradition of the historical examples I have mentioned.

But in spite of a certain continuity in this regard, a new focus or perspective may also be recognised, and in this paper I intend to set out and discuss the task and function of the relatively young discipline of the academic study of religions, which is characterised by a non-theological standpoint independent of particular religious interests. This discipline constitutes an important new factor in the processes mentioned above.

As academics or scientists we may often have asked ourselves what effect or influence a small academic discipline might have in the complex world of political and social interests, activities and sometimes overwhelming conflicts. What is our contribution to problem-solving in a plural world – sitting at our desks for hours and hours translating texts, studying incomplete sources and pondering over seemingly endless piles of literature. How can we reach academic precision and objectivity and at the same time take part in socially relevant and sometimes explosive discussions?

I will emphasise two aspects which at first may appear to be contradictory but which point to the specific significance of our discipline: on the one hand the neutral, impartial and differentiating scientific scrutiny required in the research process and on the other hand the contribution of academic knowledge in public debates and conflicts, both to matters of fact and as a basis for mutual tolerance.

On the basis of regarding both aspects as being indispensable, I will set out and discuss two important tasks for the academic study of religions relating to the diversity of religions and the current situation of escalating conflicts which are not infrequently claimed to be the result of religious motivations and orientations. These are:

1. The construction of theoretical patterns relating to the plurality of religions, taking into account the nature of our academic discipline.
2. The role of the academic study of religions as a mediator in the process of religious dialogues.

### 1. The Construction of Theoretical Patterns as a Basis for Communication and Mutual Respect between Different Religious Systems

The construction of theoretical patterns might seem to be a merely academic question or enterprise without general interest or practical relevance. I would maintain that although the first priority here is scientific necessity, the

construction of theoretical patterns can also have fruitful consequences for discussion in the public arena.

Studying specific cultural and religious phenomena, whether it be the specific development and form of Islam in fifteenth century Java, or new religious orientations in Europe, we always have to find terms and patterns for a precise description and analysis. First, following the self-determined concepts and terms of the particular groups one tries to provide a correct and authentic, descriptive representation of them. For example we may speak of *kebatinan*, referring to Javanese “*mysticism*” as an important factor in the development and spread of Islam in Java (Geertz 1968; Mulder 1998; Beatty 1999). In another case we also might use the term “*mysticism*” for *contemplation or striving for unification* as an important factor in the current interest in specific forms of religious practice and technique in some of the blossoming new religious orientations in contemporary Europe. Maybe there will be no problem using the self-determined terms and language of the particular denomination. But if we wish to compare, and to talk about differences, similarities and functions of religions, we have to find a kind of meta-communication, that is, theoretical terms which are appropriate for different frames of reference.

To stay with the examples just mentioned: is *mysticism* an appropriate term for both phenomena? Does it open an area of comparison and communication between two quite different cultural subjects? This is not the place to discuss this in detail in the hope of reaching a completely satisfying conclusion. Also, the problem is not at all new for all of us who are trying to cope with the tension between individualised terms from a particular context, on the one hand, and the necessity, on the other hand, of finding universal terms and theoretical patterns which facilitate comparison, which itself presupposes the task of categorisation, systematisation and analysis of different phenomena.

There is no single solution for this problem – it has to be discussed for every specific situation, question and context. But the task, and also the common benefit, is already grounded in the attempt to find and construct theoretical patterns. This involves opening up an area of scientific discourse and debate in order to relativise the seemingly universal patterns of the past and at the same time to find ways of locating specific phenomena, such as those mentioned above, in a wider context or system of categorisation (cf. Antes 1979).

When we speak about “religion” (even while it is used as a shared term) we might be referring to very different backgrounds and experiences. For illustration, I would like to use an example from the world of sport. If you speak about “football” you may refer to the European soccer or the American as well as the Australian way of playing football. In every case one speaks about “football” but with reference to quite different backgrounds. Even the form of the balls is different. There may be some other interesting similarities between football and religion, but with this example I simply wanted to show

the importance of local knowledge on the one hand and the practice and necessity of common communication on the other hand.

We have no alternative but to give serious thought to the problematical construction of theoretical patterns. At a superficial level there might be hardly any similarity between a woman in Germany with Christian socialisation who practises Kundalini-Yoga, a Muslim Derwish (Sufi) in Turkey and a Buddhist practising *vipassana* meditation in the Vihara Watugong in Semarang. But by formulating scientific questions and developing patterns for the description of religious behaviour it should be possible to locate all of these religious experiences in a wider, common category as expressions of various forms of religious practice which strive for inspiration, enlightenment, or extreme closeness with the absolute or with God/Allah.

Universal theoretical patterns and terms may assist in the process of scientific debate, because they allow us to discuss these different phenomena as expressions and elements of the same wider category, namely: spiritual (or religious) techniques of contemplation and ecstasy which aspire to and strive for an experience of the divine or the absolute.

But let us return just one more time to our football example: it is good for mutual understanding to know that we are all talking about games, which are performed by teams using a more or less similar ball trying to make goals and points. But at the same time we should not underestimate local variations: that is the different forms of the ball, the varying rules, and the symbols and outfits which are used.

From one particular standpoint any of the other forms might appear deviant or even to display deficits, while from a neutral perspective we can recognise local variations with their particular forms and symbols, which all convey a knowledge and power of their own.

In a similar manner we could think about the examples from the religious contexts which I have just mentioned: in these cases striving for enlightenment might be regarded as a shared destination and therefore a correct theoretical pattern for description and/or explanation. But here too, that does not permit us to underestimate the different contexts, interpretations and symbolisations of which they make use. It is theoretically conceivable that these religiously practising people might themselves reach agreement in describing themselves as striving for enlightenment, even while this does not mean that they all use the same symbols, techniques or goals.

With this in mind we may return to the question raised at the beginning: what is the correct, or the best, description for religiously diverse societies, or putting it another way, for the situation of various religious systems within any one society? One of the terms – *religious harmony* – is preferred and quite usual in Indonesia, the other – *religious pluralism* – is preferred and widespread in Germany. Maybe we could reach agreement in finding a mutually accepted term, either by settling on one of the two alternatives mentioned or choosing

a third one like “religious diversity”. But the important aspect for this debate is the consideration of two elements:

1. the *common features* (like the recognition of the existence of various religious systems and the problems of minority-majority-relations) which may *lead to shared terms* and facilitate the starting point for communication and
2. the *awareness of differences* (like varying historical backgrounds, political constitutions and cultural traditions) which *shape the particular standpoint* and situation and *include specific knowledge*.

Therefore the development of terms and theories about religions on the basis of historically and empirically (that is, social-scientifically) researched materials remains an important task in the study of religions (Seiwert 1977). The terminology and theoretical patterns may be drawn from various cultural contexts; however it is important that they can become independent of particular religious or ideological assumptions or claims without ignoring the local contexts. Insisting on this might already be an important and helpful starting point for the exchange of views, both in academic and in wider contexts (cf. Franke and Pye 2004).

## 2. The Construction of Religious Dialogues – The Academic Study of Religions as a Mediator Between Different Religious Systems

In the face of the current problems between various religious and political systems, especially regarding the apparent gap between Christian and Muslim orientated societies, it is a matter of urgent, shared interest to bring people together for inter-religious dialogues. But this process is characterised by many difficulties. Sometimes there seems to be no bridge of communication between the parties, or the participants are fearful of being overwhelmed by the presence and the demands of the others. At this point I would like to draw further on the above-mentioned “theses” (Franke and Pye 2004), with which several of the next few paragraphs are substantially aligned.

In this sphere of competing religious truth-claims the study of religions as an academic discipline can offer a position which is not intended to serve the expansion of one religion at the expense of another. From a more or less neutral position it may facilitate communication between the representatives of any particular faith and assist in setting the framework and providing possibilities for religious dialogues.

Unlike religious communities, theologies or political parties the academic study of religions is not a missionary or a missiological program. Also it is not concerned with the search for religious truth or the evaluation of religious theory and practice, but rather with the description and scientific investigation

of religious phenomena and the analysis of their functions from the standpoint of independent reflection. Because it is not a branch of any one particular theology, whether Christian, Muslim or any other, its value lies in the fact that it is independent of religious positions as such, though it seeks to understand them.

Based on its position as an independent academic discipline the study of religions can offer reliable analyses of religious systems. Moreover, researchers can investigate whether and to what extent particular religions, through their symbol formation and behavioural patterns, contribute to social harmony and integration, or on the other hand legitimise social inequality, instability or even violence. In this way a basis can be established for pointing out the social effects and functions of religious systems, over and above the work of specialists in a stricter sense.

Thus, in various ways, the study of religions can bring its knowledge to bear on the public discussion of religious and social conflicts. In particular it contributes to the objective clarification of problem areas. The critical treatment of socially important issues does not necessarily imply an evaluation of theological or religious statements as such; rather it involves a scrutiny of the consequences which particular religious standpoints may have for society and for individuals.

The study of religions can provide intellectual mediation between particular religions by clarifying the nature and the historical development of religions in a non-polemical way. Misunderstandings may be removed. Matters of fact may be clarified.

The special significance of the study of religions as an assistant in the construction of religious dialogue lies in its function as an independent mediator (and sometimes a translator). As distinct from most theological perspectives the study of religions does not teach or strive for the "unity" of religions and does not seek to insist on or press for similarity as a prerequisite for mutual understanding. However, by drawing attention clearly to the particular features and identity of various religions it may assist mutual understanding.

This function of the academic study of religions may therefore be understood as the adoption of the role of a mediator.

"*Mediation*" is a term which has a pedagogical and psychological background. In the last ten years mediation has become quite popular as a professional concept for a non-adversarial problem-solving process (cf. Ferz and Pichler 2003). During that time various centres for mediation in the public sphere have emerged for dealing with matters such as family disputes, employment disputes, contractual disputes. Mediation seeks to facilitate processes of problem-solving by helping the parties to identify issues, to negotiate constructively and to explore settlement alternatives. Mediation is not about deciding who is right or wrong, who is innocent or at fault; nor is it concerned with declaring a winner and a loser. The goal is to find a practical solution and a



settlement that is acceptable to everyone involved, having regard to their different interests, needs and concerns. (An interesting example of such programs may be found in the internet under the name of "The Singapore Mediation Centre".)

By analogy it would seem to be feasible for the academic study of religions, and those engaged in it, to play a certain role in bringing together various parties from different religious communities. Precisely because it does not itself adopt a religious position, this "*science*" is able to provide some of the functions which are typically referred to as "*mediation*".

Taking over the role as mediator the academic study of religions would retain its neutral standpoint while at the same time opening an area of communication and contact between different religious communities, bringing in its knowledge of their particular backgrounds and patterns. Maybe it could also "lead and guide the parties through a problem-solving process", just as a professional mediator would (cf. the website of the Singapore Mediation Centre) whenever this is needed. Up to now we have not had many experiences with this kind of activity in our discipline, but it might be worth considering as a potentially valuable opportunity for constructive service.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

Religious tolerance and harmony should be based on the acceptance of diversity including the knowledge of local varieties, particular shapes and also some basic differences – while not ignoring those similarities and shared elements which may serve as a bridge or a starting point for communication.

I hope that the necessity of emphasising common features as well as of being aware of differences has become clear, for both are indispensable elements in the process of mutual understanding. The academic study of religions is probably able to improve this process with its requirement of, and potential for, a differentiated perspective provided by scientific scrutiny.

So the task and function of the academic study of religions in the face of religious diversity could be summarised under these two points:

1. The construction of theoretical patterns relating to the plurality of religions, taking into account the nature of our academic discipline and
2. the role of the academic study of religions as a mediator in the process of religious dialogue.

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1 A recent case where this has already occurred may be seen in the structure of the meetings between German Protestant theologians and Japanese Shin Buddhists held since 1999 in Marburg and Kyōto (see for example Barth, Minoura and Pye 2000, and Pye 2004).

It is not by chance that I have spoken of the *study of religions* rather than of “*religious studies*”. This is because I wished to point out the differences between an interreligious perspective and a neutral, independent and empirically testable standpoint. It is above all this position which is able to facilitate mutual acceptance in the face of difference and variety, both emphasising particular and local characteristics, without forcing unity, and opening an area of communication by mediating and translating between different parties. In short, by bringing in differentiated knowledge and information, we may assist in opening up a sphere of mutual understanding.

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