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Asian Conceptual Taxonomies ‘Before Religion’

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-152353>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

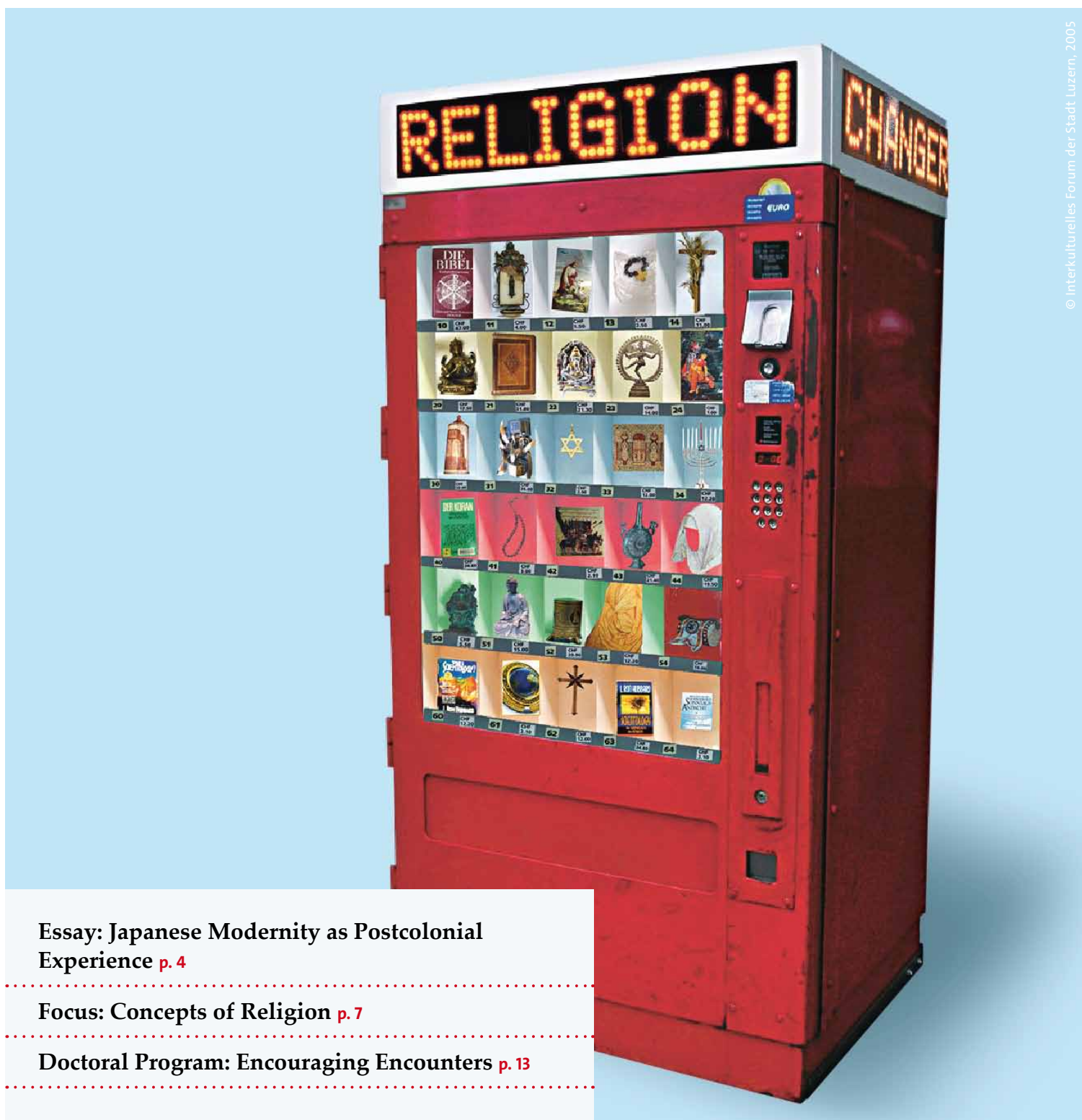
Brandenburg, Ulrich; Steineck, Raji C; Malinar, Angelika; Uehlinger, Christoph (2012). Asian Conceptual Taxonomies ‘Before Religion’. *Asia Europe Bulletin*, (1):7-9.



Asia & Europe *Bulletin*

The Bulletin of the University Research Priority Program Asia and Europe

N° 1, February 2012



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Asian Conceptual Taxonomies 'Before Religion'

On the occasion of the 2011 fall semester lecture series "Concepts of Religion in the Modern Age," professors Raji C. Steineck and Christoph Uehlinger elaborate on the current re-search agenda of Research Field 1: "Concepts and Taxonomies," one of three research fields at the URPP Asia and Europe.

Interview: Ulrich Brandenburg

Professors Steineck and Uehlinger, after the last two years' preoccupation with the topic of philosophy, Research Field 1

is at present mainly concerned with the concept of "religion." What is the rationale behind this interest in religion in intercultural contexts?

Raji C. Steineck: The objective of Research Field 1: *Concepts and Taxonomies* is a closer examination of the fundamental theoretical terms and concepts that frame our research but that, at the same time, derive from a specific European tradition. The accusation can accordingly be made that they pre-determine the research perspective in a way that may not do justice to the issues under consideration in non-European countries. For example, the



Raji C. Steineck: "In Japan, there are many interested parties who have appropriated the concept of religion."

The Research Fields of the URPP Asia and Europe

Within its comprehensive interdisciplinary research structure, the URPP Asia and Europe focuses on three thematically differentiated research fields.

Research Field 1: Concepts and Taxonomies reflects on a precise terminology that is vital for conceptualizing and studying phenomena such as identity constructions, exchanges and encounters between various cultural spaces in Europe and in Asia. One of its major goals is to contribute to the understanding of basic concepts, especially their taxonomical status and position, translational equivalents and correlates, as well as their use as heuristic instruments.

Research Field 2: Entangled Histories explores how the processes of cultural exchange and the constructions of cultural boundaries between Asia and Europe are shaped by agents and embedded in particular temporal and spatial contexts. The research field highlights the dynamics of exchange and constructions of cultural differences. Entangled histories are studied primarily with regard to historical, institutional, and geographical interactions, as well as media representations (literature, film, and art), and the history of knowledge.

Research Field 3: Norms and Social Order(s) is devoted to the study of the social and political negotiations that take place when norms and ideas about social and political order circulate across and between different places and social contexts, including, but not limited to, questions of economic and political interdependencies, the transnationalization of law, the interaction of individuals, local communities, national and international organizations, as well as global discourses on statehood and development.

two contemporary terms “philosophy” and “religion” are demarcated rather clearly from each other in European contexts, suggesting a clear distinction between the socio-cultural fields and academic disciplines related to them. Among other things, one may ask whether this sharp distinction is not distorting things when applied to non-European contexts, especially pre-modern ones.

Christoph Uehlinger: Our research topic is not “religion” as such but “concepts of religion.” The question involves the place and level of significance a concept like “religion” or “philosophy” occupies in a culturally determined conceptual order. Someone who wishes to explore religion should know what to include or to exclude. This is a relatively easy matter in discursive settings where “religion” is used as a concept, but what about contexts where such a concept seems to be lacking? What we are doing is groundwork, so to speak. As for the change in emphasis—from “philosophy” to “religion”—, we are proceeding from the current competencies and projects at the URPP Asia and Europe. Philosophy was at the forefront because several members of the research program were engaged with philosophical-historical or, more specifically, philosophical-conceptual inquiries, histories of philosophy in specific non-European contexts etc. Religion now follows because the study of religions has ever been part of the research program and proven to be of interest for several among us. It was briefly debated whether or not the concept of “theology”—rather than “religion”—should be placed alongside “philosophy.” We decided not to do so in order not to restrict and precondition our discussions.

But the concept of religion is also fraught with tension.

Steineck: Fraught with tension, absolutely—but that does not mean that it

is inapplicable or futile in Asian contexts. In Japan, for example, there are many interested parties who have appropriated the concept of religion. In the various responses to Western imperialist pressure, religion came into play as a positive identifier of Asianness, East-Asianness, or specifically Japaneseness, functioning as something from the past that could possibly lead towards—or beyond—science, technology, and modernity. It is accordingly not merely a concept with which Europeans approached Asia in order to categorize what they found there. It is a concept that was adopted and continues to be used affirmatively as much as it was criticized.

So does this activity in the context of contemporary Asia have ongoing relevance or do you see your research in more exclusively historical terms?

Steineck: All of it plays a role in current arguments, but concerning our program we don’t want to follow the dictates of actual discourses. Our focus is on fundamental issues, and for that reason we have recently decided to explore historically distant sources and above all to ask ourselves what cognitive and normative categories existed prior to the emergence of the modern concept of religion. We are not geared to the pursuit of relevance for contemporary social issues, although our research does have implications insofar as it sheds some light on certain ideological uses of these traditions in the present.

Uehlinger: Within the labor division at the URPP Asia and Europe, our research field works from a deliberate “history of concepts” perspective, which involves the historical analysis of language systems and taxonomies within which these concepts operate. Accordingly, one question of particular interest to us is how Asian conceptual taxonomies operated “before religion,” that is before they came into contact with European notions of “re-



Christoph Uehlinger: "Increasing media talk on 'religion' does not necessarily correspond to an intensification of religious practice."

ligion" and adapted to it in various ways. "Religion" is usually considered to be an essentially European concept, which is correct in historical terms. The question is whether there was no such thing in Asian contexts before, whether we can observe analogous concepts in pre-modern Asian conceptual taxonomies, and more generally, how these taxonomies were structured and operated—"before religion."

Nowadays there is often talk of a "revival of religion." For your research, is this consequently only a marginal interest?

Uehlinger: This area is not central for us, though one could of course formulate a concept-historical investigation on contemporary uses of the term "religion" and its functions in post-modern societies. Regarding your question, assessments differ greatly within contemporary studies on religion whether one should speak of a "revival of religion" as such, or whether it is in fact the concept of religion

which experiences a revival, notably in globalized media. Increasing media talk on "religion" does not necessarily correspond to an intensification of religious practice.

The narrative is of course what adapts here in relation to, for example, the theories of secularization.

Uehlinger: Precisely. As a theme, then, there is a "revival of religion," probably by virtue of the definite decline in secular ideologies that explained "religion" as false consciousness, ideology etc. and put a taboo on religious practice in various ways. Today the field seems more open to being occupied anew with religious discourse of various kinds.

Then is your own research also participating in the revival of the concept?

Steineck: I don't think so, mainly because the concept has never been "dead" in the study of Asian cultural histories. In this sense, our research contributes to the reflection and partial

revision of earlier studies of Asia—whether European or Asian—based on the insight, that the concept of religion initially applied to the study of Asian religious traditions was a concept strongly shaped by certain Christian, especially Protestant, notions. That insight profoundly changed the historiography of Japanese religions, calling for a certain revision and a process of reflection. This work of revision has begun in the last twenty years and remains far from complete.

Professors Raji C. Steineck (Japanese Studies) and Christoph Uehlinger (Study of Religions) coordinate the research group focusing on the concept of religion. Together with Prof. Angelika Malinar (Indian Studies) and Dr. Ralph Weber (Chinese Studies), they were responsible for the lecture series "Concepts of Religion in the Modern Age."

The Annual Conference of the URPP Asia and Europe (November 1–3, 2012) will be dedicated to the "Concepts of Religion between Asia and Europe."