

Towards a Critical Disentanglement of the 'Religion' Nexus in the Global East

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Abstract : 'Religion' as a term is not native to the Global East. The concept 'religion' is both understood in its meaning of 'religious traditions', commonly referring to the 'World Religions' and in its adjective meaning 'the religious' or 'religiosity' as a separate domain of human culture, commonly contrasted to the secular. Though neither of these understandings are native to the historical worldviews of East Asia, their development in modern Western scholarship has had an enormous impact on the self-understanding of cultural diversity in the Global East as well. One example is the identification and therefore elevation to the status of World Religion of 'Buddhism' which connected formerly dispersed religious practices throughout the Global East and subsumed them under this powerful label. On the other hand, we see how popular religiosity, shamanism and hybrid cultural expressions have become excluded from genuine religion; this had an immense impact on the sense of legitimacy of these practices, which became sometimes labeled as superstition are rejected as magic. Our theoretical frameworks on religion in the Global East do not always consider the complex power dynamics between religious actors, both elites and lay expressions of religion in everyday life, governments and religious studies scholars. In order to get a clear image of how religiosity functions in the context of the Global East, we have to take into account these power dynamics. What is important in particular is the issue of religious identity or absence of religious identity. The self-understanding of religious actors in the Global East is often very different from what scholars of religion observe. Religious practice, from an etic perspective, is often unrelated to religious identification from an emic perspective. But we also witness the rise of Christian churches in the Global East, in which religious identity and belonging does play a pivotal role. Finally, religion in the Global East has since the beginning of the 20th Century been conceptualized as the 'other' or republicanism or Marxist-Maoist ideology. It is important not to deny the key role of colonial thinking in the process of religion formation in the Global East. In this paper, it is argued that religious realities constituted emerging as a result from our theory of religion, and that these religious realities in turn inform our theory. Therefore, the relationship between phenomenology of religion and theory of religion can never be disentangled. In fact, we have to acknowledge that our conceptualizations of religious diversity are always already influenced by our valuation of those cultural expressions that we have come to call 'religious'.

Keywords : global east, religion, religious belonging, secularity

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