
Foreword

Since the time of Edward Said and Talal Asad, if not before, we have known that the Western view of ‘the Orient’ – from the Near East to Japan – is an intellectual and cultural construct. In addition, the ‘Christian occident’ has been used, and is still used, as a politically charged term. Analogous to ‘Orientalism’, ‘Occidentalism’ has become the focus of considerable debate. The geopolitical consequences of this confrontation seem obvious and culminate in Samuel Huntington’s thesis of a ‘Clash of Civilisations’ based on essentialised religious differences. But the concepts of ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are not, and have never been, homogenous. Nor have they been formed, nor do they continue to evolve, without mutual interaction. The global interdependence we witness today – often labelled ‘globalisation’ – is nothing new and in actual fact has its origin in the formative phases of the major cultural and religious traditions.

These ideas have served as a point of departure for the the research being conducted at the Käte Hamburger Collegium for the study of ‘Dynamics in the History of Religions’ at Ruhr-Universität, Bochum. An interdisciplinary undertaking involving Classical Philology, Protestant and Catholic Theology, South Asian Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Studies, History, Comparative Religion and Philosophy, the Collegium is focussing on the origin and development of the major religious traditions by stressing contact and exchange, beyond stereotypes and ideological misuse. Our basic thesis is that the major religious traditions form, establish and develop in an environment of mutual dependency and exchange. The interconnection of self-perception and perception of self by the other, of adaptation and demarcation, and of internal differentiation within traditions are, for those in the Collegium framework, a fundamental constituent of religious and historical dynamics.

The collection of papers in this volume, which were edited by Michael Willis while he was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Collegium, does much to extend and deepen our research agendas, especially with regard to South Asia. Religious interaction over macro-regions is often perceived as a relatively new or modern phenomena, but India shows us that traces of such encounters go back nearly two thousand years. The fascinating diversity and complexity of religious discourse in South Asia puts paid to one of the most presumptuous labels of Orientalism, that of India as a mere ‘sub-continent’ against the ‘continents’ of Europe or America. Michael Willis’ work helps address this imbalance and, as director of the research consortium, I am grateful to him for teaming up with us to expand our horizons through his special fields of interest. It is also my pleasant duty to express my thanks to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research for generously funding the consortium and making its work possible.

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