

Global Religious History

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Abstract

Understandings of religion have been fundamentally transformed since the nineteenth century. The respective contradictions, ambiguities, continuities, and ruptures can be most comprehensively grasped when viewed against the background of global entanglements. For this purpose, the approach of global religious history proposes a range of theoretical and methodological tools. Its theoretical repertoire is largely informed by a critical engagement with poststructuralist epistemology and postcolonial perspectives embedded in a consistent genealogical approach. At the outset, it aims at bridging divisions, including those between postcolonial and global history, between disciplines such as religious studies and history, as well as between different area studies. This implies a theoretically robust reflexion of the question of what *global entanglements* mean in global religious history, along with the question of how to distinguish global religious history from approaches usually qualified by the prefix *trans* as, for example, in “transregional.” In this introduction, we offer an in-depth discussion of the theoretical foundations and methodological implications of global religious history.

Keywords

postcolonialism – poststructuralism – genealogy – modernity – entanglement – global history

1 Global History and Religious Studies – Organizing a Blind Date

Most scholars would agree that the notions at the center of this issue – *global* and *religious* – are of major relevance for one another's meaning. Yet, if our readers were to enquire about their meaning, they most likely would receive a different answer from any person asked. This is specifically likely if the question were directed at experts on global and/or religious subjects. Scholars of both domains invest a great amount of energy into discussing the meaning of their subjects and have, for the most part, settled on the impossibility of establishing indisputable definitions and approaches. While both subjects are inherently intertwined and can benefit from the perspectives of one another's governing disciplines, dialogue between them appears limited. In the present issue, we propose how a global religious history might be systematically conceived, focusing on the study of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, witchcraft, and esotericism.

The assembled articles depart from two central assumptions: first, that meanings of religion emerged through contested demarcations from other terms such as science, philosophy, politics, or superstition. Such demarcations must be taken into account in order to investigate the underlying historical processes, whose instability and contingency must be continuously reflected and contextualized. Second, such a contextualization can only grasp the complexity of historical debates if their global dimension is considered. Instead of assuming that a "Western understanding of religion" has been exported into the rest of the world, and "non-Westerners" merely reacted to that export, meanings of religion are understood as something fundamentally unstable. Actors outside of "the West" actively and decisively participated on debates that attempted to "fixate" the meaning of religion. This participation resulted in the shifting of boundaries of the discourse about religion and religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc.). It also led to the emergence and shaping of identities. Shedding light on such developments, the contributions to this issue will cover the broad geographical contexts of Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Chronologically, they range from the nineteenth until the twentieth century. In diverse yet compatible ways, they illustrate how the approach of global religious history can be made fruitful for the contextualization of local developments within a global historical context.

Lately, there is a broad consensus within religious studies that present-day understandings of religion have been shaped decisively in the second half of the nineteenth century (e.g., Fitzgerald 2000; Kippenberg 2002; Krech 2002; McCutcheon 2003; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012; Hermann 2015; Krämer 2015; Krämer 2019; Thurner 2020). At the same time, there is disagreement

about what this means for the conceptualization of religion as well as for concrete research topics in religious studies. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that since the category of religion originated as a result of European expansion, it is inadequate for analyzing contexts outside of Europe and North America. From this perspective, studying Islam or Hinduism as religions implies a Eurocentric perspective that cements global asymmetries and perpetuates epistemic violence (Fitzgerald 2000: xi, 135; Ahmed 2016: 178–197). On the other hand, scholars have argued that non-European and non-Christian actors have, during that time, controversially positioned their own “traditions” vis-à-vis ongoing debates about religion. Accordingly, they have called for paying attention to the (re-)conceptualization of religion by such non-Christian and “non-Western” actors. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (2010: 256–268; 2013: 185–191) and Adrian Hermann (2015: 197), for instance, have underlined the need for taking into account global historical perspectives within religious studies to advance a decentered historiography and engage in interregional and transcultural comparison that pays specific attention to often ambivalent formations of identities in a global setting.

Yet, there is relatively little reflection within religious studies on how to write a global history that concentrates on the notion of religion. The discipline’s engagement with global history often appears to be rather tangential, although important work on in this direction has already been done (e.g., Bergunder 2010; Bergunder 2014; Bergunder 2016; Bergunder 2020; Kollmar-Paulenz 2010; Kollmar-Paulenz 2013; Hermann 2015; Stegmann 2018). Likewise, while religion is often acknowledged to be of paramount importance by global historians, they rarely engage with religious studies. Notable exceptions include Sebastian Conrad, who emphasizes the central role of “the concept of religion itself” within imperial and missionary contexts, stressing that “religious knowledge and imperial power were bound together” (Conrad 2018: 619). Conrad’s interest, however, lies in macro-perspectives such as the questions of modernity and secularization, as well as how “the concept of religion” was intertwined with social transformations and the global circulation of knowledge (Conrad 2018: 657–659). In a similar vein, Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori approach religion by investigating how “a series of intellectual, institutional, and political factors conditioned the features of the proprietary networks through which particular traditions of thought travelled” (Moyn & Sartori 2013: 13–14). By contrast, global religious history does not view “the concept of religion” or “traditions” as fixed entities that could “travel” across the world. Like most religious studies scholars, we hold that such a view – which is further underscored by Moyn’s and Sartori’s discussion of the “three monotheisms” of “Judaism, Islam, and Christianity” (Moyn & Sartori 2013: 13–14) – falls short of

grasping the complexity and fluidity of what historically became designed as “religion” or “Islam,” for instance, since the nineteenth century. While broad-stroke inclusions of the role of religion for global historical research questions are valuable, the original contribution of global religious history lies precisely in fine-grained analyses of *how* exactly religion was negotiated by historical actors within globally entangled contexts.

The crucial issue is that the terms “global” and “religion” have scarcely received critical reflection from one another’s governing disciplines. Much theoretical potential thus remains untapped, as both disciplines are concerned with the problem that the meaning of their main subject happens to be quite unclear – arguably, they derive their strengths and theoretical substance precisely from the need to constantly debate and refine their approaches (cf. Strube: forthcoming-a). This is also the case with terms such as “European,” “Western,” and “Christian,” which are frequently used interchangeably without further explication, as Michael Bergunder (2012: 95) has observed.

In order to systematically put religious studies and global history into dialogue, we propose that a number of questions need to be addressed. First, what does it mean to write a *global* history? Second, what does *entanglement* mean and what is the epistemological place of *global connections* in global religious history? On this basis, we will be equipped to scrutinize the issue of “modernity” and the historiographical challenges of the colonial framework, whose ramifications can be observed up to the present day. Such a scrutiny demands substantiation of the notions of global connections and agency, specifically in light of the vast power asymmetries under colonialism. While the latter demand careful theoretical reflection, we should explicitly state that we do not agree with those postcolonial approaches that claim cultural incommensurability and suggest “vernacular” or “indigenous” historiographies in order to meet the historiographical challenges posed by the historical facts of colonialism; in our view, this reproduces the same binaries typical of Eurocentrism. By contrast, we offer a specific epistemology and historiographical methodology to explore how meanings of religion were constantly negotiated within globally entangled contexts, without claiming that global religious history should be the only legitimate way to approach these issues.

2 An Overview of Global History Approaches

Understandings of “global history” vary drastically (for a more comprehensive overview, see Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube 2021a: 56–62). Most scholars who describe their approach as global have adopted an epistemic modesty and

tolerance for different perspectives. For example, Dominic Sachsenmaier (2011: 70–78) has stressed the “necessary impossibility of defining global history.” In a similar vein, Patrick Manning (2011: 70–78) conceives it as “a framework for disciplinary studies, parallel in a sense to the framework of area studies” (2003: 169). Roland Wenzlhuemer (2017: 12–13) has stressed that global history “should not be viewed as a solution to fundamental challenges of historiography – its methods as well as its goals for knowledge production –, but as a problematization and critical (self-)reflection that ideally provides partial solutions. It is hence primarily a *perspective*.” A perspective on *what*, however? Bruce Mazlish (2006: 1, 7–22), for instance, advocates a “new global history” that explicitly focuses on “the present-day process of globalization,” while acknowledging “its antecedents and earlier forms” (cf. Wenzlhuemer 2017: 25–29). In contrast, Pamela Crossley (2008: 11–27) has proposed a *longue durée* perspective that departs from the earliest evidence of human activity. Such an approach often has a strong comparative thrust, as is the case with Manning’s “world history,” which is conceptualized as an occupation with “the story of connections within the global human community.” This world history, too, is explicitly positioned within a long development of historiographical attempts to write histories of humanity, while it emphasizes the new dimensions and audiences that have emerged during the last two centuries (Manning 2003: 3, 117).

In light of these diverging viewpoints, a threefold distinction suggested by Conrad (2016: 6–11) is helpful. The first paradigm views historical research as a synthesis. From this perspective, global history is world history in the literal sense – it includes everything that has ever happened worldwide. Attempts to operate within this large framework can turn out quite differently. On the one hand, there are large-scale syntheses that attempt to capture the essential historical developments of a certain time or epoch worldwide and to present them in an integrated narrative. Such representations must necessarily choose which phenomena they deem relevant. They stay on the surface and are very selective. On the other hand, there are numerous studies that trace a specific subject through time and space on a global scale (Conrad 2016: 7–8). For Crossley (2008: 4), for example, this form of global history even represents the ultimate approach. She uses the metaphor of a *context spinner* – a hypothetical instrument that describes global history from the perspective of a certain material, product, concept, or natural phenomenon. This would result in integrated global representations, for example the history of silk or the effects of earthquakes. Global connections occur naturally in this variant of global history, but usually not as knowledge-producing elements (cf. Wenzlhuemer 2017: 15–19).

A second paradigm of global history, Conrad argues, is not concerned with world history in its broadest sense. Rather, it focuses on global connections. This approach is based on the assumption that no culture, no society exists in complete isolation, and that exchanges are of essential importance for their historical development. Most authors who have thought about the theoretical and methodological orientation of global history point to the fact that global history deals with the role of global or transregional connections and the mutually influencing processes in history that can be attributed to said connections (Conrad 2016: 67–68). However, this is seldom elaborated further. The question about the actual analytical significance of global connections remains unclear: what does such a focus on connections actually mean? What is the global historian's cognitive interest in this regard? What is the added value for the field of history (and the disciplines it interacts with)? Even the seemingly simple question of what precisely should be regarded as a “global connection” is rarely discussed explicitly (Conrad 2016: 67–72). In this variant, global history is indeed understood as a *perspective* – a “particular way of looking at history” (Conrad 2016: 11) – constituted by the centrality of global connections which, however, remain under-reflected.

This reflexive deficit is where the third paradigm, which is the variant Conrad identifies with, builds on. According to this variant, global connections constitute not only a specific perspective with which historians assess their data but also an *object* in themselves. In this sense, the meaningful applicability of the perspective depends, among other things, on the structural conditions of global integration. The crucial question is whether global connections have already been structurally consolidated in a way that allows for assessing the effects of said connections and for analyzing the conditions that made them possible (Conrad 2016: 70). For Conrad, only an amalgamation of global history as perspective *and* as an object is analytically conducive, as it allows for a differentiated handling of global connections with the intent of producing alternative narratives that make hitherto neglected voices visible (Conrad 2016: 11–12, 67–72, 217–219).

In this sense, the term *global* in global religious history does *not* signify “universal” or “planetary” (Conrad & Randeria 2013: 40; cf. Veer 2001: 11; Manning 2003: 270–272; Wenzlhuemer 2017: 79–84; Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube 2021a: 58). On the contrary, it implies an awareness of global interconnections and structural conditions, focusing on interactions, mobility, and fluidity (Conrad 2016: 12, 64–65; cf. Moyn & Sartori 2013: 5–15). Subscribing to this understanding, the aim of global religious history is not to write a universal “history of religion” encompassing the entire planet. Rather, the aim is to shed light on the global connections, or entanglements between different contexts, with

a twofold aim. The first aim is to understand historical developments within those contexts, depending on the concrete subject under scrutiny. The second aim is to reflect on the implications of binaries, such as local/global, colonizer/colonized, or historical knowledge production as such (Conrad 2016: 57). Thus, a central, or arguably *the* central concern of global historical approaches is to overcome methodological nationalism as well as Eurocentrism (cf. O'Brien 2006: 4; Conrad 2016: 3–6), and to tell, speaking with Crossley, “a story without a center” (Crossley 2008: 4, 102–121).

3 What Are Global Entanglements?

What, then, does *global entanglement* mean and what is the epistemological place of *global connections* in global religious history? Wenzlhuemer has rightly expressed his concern that the notion of global connections is now so widely in use that it has become a kind of “terminological passepartout” (Wenzlhuemer 2017: 14–23, 39–43). Moyn and Sartori, too, admit that “interconnectedness itself might be conceptualized in quite different ways: as a result of a European colonialism with world ambitions; or of the construction of an international system; or of the intertwining of multiple networks of trade, communication, transportation, military engagement, and diplomacy; or of the historical development of capitalist society” (Moyn & Sartori 2013: 15). Wenzlhuemer (2017: 22–23) bemoans that it often remains largely obscure what exactly differentiates global from transnational and/or transregional connections. Thus, Wenzlhuemer disagrees with Conrad that global history has so far predominantly dealt with mere connections and too little with their structural solidifications. Global history, he argues, has failed to develop a sufficiently differentiated notion of global connections (Wenzlhuemer 2017: 21).

Consequently, Wenzlhuemer (2017: 17–23) ultimately dismisses Conrad's plea to regard global connections as an object in its own right (cf. Scheuzger 2019: 127). For him, the crucial epistemological starting point is: how and why do people in very different locations and contexts create “global or transregional” (Wenzlhuemer uses these terms synonymously) connections and how do these connections affect people? This means exploring the historical power or weight (*Geschichtsmächtigkeit*, Wenzlhuemer 2017: 23) of global connections, including the instances where this power is null. Put differently, the aim of historical investigation must be to classify global connections within an ensemble of factors, even if that sometimes means that they play little or no role. Recognition of the limits of the influence of transfer and exchange must form a constitutive part of the historical investigation. Thus, at its core,

Wenzlhuemer argues, global history should be about how global connections arise through the actions of people and how global connections in turn have an effect on people's "thoughts, feelings, and actions." As this can take place inside and outside of structurally entrenched conditions, global entanglements should be viewed as belonging to a "multifactorial" ensemble in which the interplay between human actors and global connections must of course be embedded (Wenzlhuemer 2017: 20).

In our view, Wenzlhuemer addresses an important and neglected aspect of global history. Yet, we propose to draw different conclusions from this methodological deficit. In our view, Wenzlhuemer's ultimate relativization of Conrad's call to regard global connections as an object does not reflect the historian's discursive positionality in a sufficiently resolute way. Regarding global connections as an object, we contend, entails regarding global entanglements *as such* as a constitutive part of historical analysis. This is necessary since the historian's perspective is itself entrenched in epistemological configurations resulting from global connections (as is the case with "modernity" and other concepts that historians cannot eschew). Put differently, historians do not access their sources apart from notions that are the product of a globally entangled discourse. Wenzlhuemer's (2017: 20) plea to ascertain how global connections arise through the "actions of people" in order to study how these in turn affect "people's actions" must be enriched by a robust discourse theory that does not limit discursive practices to verbal articulations. It must include the circulation and trajectories of material artefacts and yet view the notion of "materiality" as a result of discursive negotiations (Butler 1993: 8–11, 29–31; cf. Haustein 2021, in this issue). More importantly, however, it must depart from the present, i.e., from a constant reflection of how researchers assess the data they interpret. In other words, a reflection of the hegemonic dynamics in which scholars are positioned and position themselves *doing* their research is not exterior to the sources they investigate. And since these dynamics are not detached from global interactions entrenched in power asymmetries, global connections cannot be understood merely as a *perspective* but also as an *object*.

With these deliberations in mind, historians can speak of global entanglements if they can show an interaction or relationality between discursive elements or signifiers (verbal and non-verbal) that is discernible not only over long distances (cf. Scheuzger 2019: 129) and across entirely different boundaries, but also as a reference to a predominant global discourse that affects what the researchers regard as their studied subject. Crucially, global connections always relate to local contexts, forming a mutually dependent and fluid ensemble that might be best characterized with the notion of *entanglement*. Yet, they are not "just there in the sources" waiting to be discovered. Rather it

is the investigators' specific cognitive interest (cf. Maltese 2019b: 12, 18, 20) that brings them to the fore. In this sense, we agree with Stefan Scheuzger (2019: 151) that "there cannot be clear and absolute criteria that determine whether a historical phenomenon qualifies as global or not" – even if he does not frame the question of predominant present-day understandings of objects of study as we do. It is this self-reflexive dimension and the focus on present understandings (Maltese 2019b: 18–20; Maltese et al. 2019: 3, 9) that, in our view, is crucial for a theoretical distinction between global from transregional – a distinction that, as already indicated, Wenzlhuemer apparently does not draw (cf. Scheuzger 2019: 126–127). Put differently, it is this self-reflexive dimension informed by poststructuralist epistemology (which we will elaborate below) that serves to distinguish global entanglements from notions of connections usually qualified by the prefix *trans* as, for example, in "transregional" (*contra* Scheuzger 2019: 125). This is also why – following Conrad – the question of global connections is not just a question of methodology but of theory (*pace* Wenzlhuemer).

This ties the investigated material as well as the investigator to hegemonic claims – which is also the point where global religious history differs from what Scheuzger (2019) calls "polycentric history." The question whether a discourse can be discerned as predominant or hegemonic, whether it is characterized by continuity or discontinuity to previous hegemonic discourses, is always a question of assessment by the scholar, which needs to be proved by sources (Maltese 2017: 608; Maltese 2019b: 12, 18, 20). Therefore, it is always open to debate (cf. Bergunder 2010: 59–60). It is imperative to consider the positionality of researchers within current debates and hegemonic dynamics, comprising human actors as well as institutions, laws or norms, physical constraints, economic resources, etc. (Maltese 2018: 155; Maltese 2019b: 18–19; Strube 2021a: 61). Therefore, global historians are not exempt from crafting a narrative that is determined by selectivity (Bergunder 2020: 71). Yet, the global historian's account will present an alternative narrative that questions apparently self-evident and matter-of-fact knowledge by unraveling the conditions that made any apparent matter-of-factness possible – or, in other words, by showing on the base of solid historical source work how certain knowledge was claimed to be universal in a way that has naturalized and justified the domination of some over others.

It must be noted that an approach focusing on entanglements does not presuppose that connections can be found unaltered, to the same degree, in the same way, and at any time (Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube 2021a: 58). An *entangled history* is tendentially fragmentary in the sense that it investigates concrete problems and connections instead of postulating world-historical totalities or attempting to write a history of the entire planet (Conrad & Randeria 2013: 40;

cf. Veer 2001: 11). The vital point is that we do not perceive “global entanglements” as a system that can be investigated in its totality. Rather, it stands for multiple relationalities intertwined with each other like a rhizome (Deleuze et al. 2004: 3–28) that can only be accessed by singling out specific connections. In this sense, we concur with Harald Fischer-Tiné’s plea for a combination of perspectives from area studies and global history that “marries” micro- with macro-perspectives on historical developments (Fischer-Tiné 2018: 50–51, 67–74; cf. Ghobrial 2019: 10–17; Scheuzger 2019: 143, Maltese 2017: 601; Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube 2021a: 58). When complemented with the concern of decentering knowledge production (i.e., overcoming Eurocentric biases as well as resisting the temptation to posit alternative centers) and with the self-reflexive shift, the micro-perspectives typical of area studies can provide fresh insights into the relation between sedimented practices that have previously been viewed in isolation – the subjects of the articles in this issue are instructive cases in point.

4 The Historiographical Challenges of Colonial Modernity

The issues of knowledge production and Eurocentrism point to the historiographical challenges posed by colonialism and the contested meanings of “modernity” (cf. Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube 2021a: 46, 56–60). Debates about the meaning of religion are of major importance for this aspect (for an extended discussion of sociological concepts of modernity and modernization with regard to global religious history, see Hermann 2015: 369–437). The repertoire of global history is specifically useful to approach the ambivalent and fuzzy notion of modernity, as it explicitly focuses “on the global conditions and interactions through which the modern world emerged” (Conrad 2016: 76). Most of the historical actors the reader will encounter in this issue offer impressive insights into these conditions and interactions, as they took a polemical or at least ambivalent stance against “modernity,” which was frequently linked to “Westernization,” and hence to the diffusion of allegedly “Western” knowledge.

This highlights the circumstance that colonialism has formed the historical framework for the exchanges here under scrutiny. Surely the inhabitants of colonies had to react to extreme power asymmetries, but not only did they participate on global debates about the meaning of religion despite their precarious situation, they *actively* and significantly shaped them (Strube 2020: 152–153, 164–167; Strube: forthcoming-b). This underlines the need for a critical approach to Eurocentrism in scholarship, as it is still sometimes expressed

in the alleged diffusion of European achievements culminating in modernity (Conrad 2016: 3–4; Conrad & Randeria 2013: 35–36; Yelle 2013: ix–x, 6–7; cf. Crossley 2008: 28–46, 106–108). As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the idea of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” lies at the heart of the assumption that “non-Western” societies must always be passive recipients of European knowledge (Chakrabarty 2000: 7–8, 12–15; cf. Asad 2003: 13–14). One result of this assumption is that historians sometimes do not engage with any “non-Western” sources or scholarship devoted to them, even when writing from global perspectives. This is not the result of ill intent or ignorance, but it must be viewed as the “result of a much more complex theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced” (Chakrabarty 2000: 28–29; cf. Randeria & Römhild 2013: 15–17; Sachsenmaier 2011: 39–45). Today, it is widely acknowledged that it would be mistaken to assume a unidirectional diffusion of “the Western concept of religion” into the rest of the world (Bergunder 2016: 87; Bergunder 2020; cf. Nehring 2003; Hermann 2015; Cyranka 2018; Tschacher 2018). In practice, however, we often encounter diffusionist narratives and more or less implicit assumptions of an origin of “the modern concept of religion” in “the West” (cf. Strube 2021a: 52–55; Maltese 2018: 149–150).

Bearing in mind that meanings of religion have been decisively shaped during the colonial period is imperative not least because of colonialism’s manifold ramifications up to the present day. Striking a balance between awareness of colonial power structures and the agency of colonized people demands careful historical contextualization backed up by theoretical-methodological reflection (Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube: forthcoming-b). Perspectives from global history have been a valuable corrective to some postcolonial tendencies that solely focus on the hegemonic role of European colonialism (Conrad 2016: 56–57; Moyn & Sartori 2013: 18–20; for the case of Hinduism, cf. Frykenberg 1993: 533–534 or King 1999: 159). A particularly important point is that “positive Western exceptionalism” sometimes found its mirror image in postcolonial notions of cultural imperialism that “are essentially diffusionist and take the European origins of modernity for granted” (Conrad 2016: 74–75). As Fischer-Tiné and Susanne Gehrmann argue, strict lines between colonizer and colonized only “hinder our ability to grasp both the specific agency of historical actors as well as the heterogeneous and changing character of colonial cultures” (Fischer-Tiné & Gehrmann 2008: 4–5). Global historians highlight the circumstance that the spatialization and regionalization still serving as the foundations of academic disciplines call for recognition as historical constructs and concomitant critical self-reflection (Duara 2013; Conrad & Randeria 2013: 33–34). From the perspective of global religious history, the solution to the historical fact of colonial conquest and oppression must *not* be a retreat to

“indigenous” historiographies, as this would reproduce the very binaries that non-Eurocentric scholarship should complicate.

How, then, can we grasp historical understandings of modernity and relate them to ongoing theoretical debates? Two pivotal aspects deserve special highlighting: first, it should be stressed that the connections and exchanges that shaped understandings of modernity emerged out of *diachronic* developments. The issue of *when* we can speak of global connections is thus subject to debate among global historians, not least because they predominantly focus on the modern period (e.g., Moyn & Sartori 2013: 15, 20; Manning 2003: 265–270; Strube: forthcoming-a; Strube: 58–61). There is some consensus that “global connections are preceded by conditions and that it is essential to thoroughly understand these conditions before [scholars] can hope to understand the connections themselves. Exchange, in other words, may be a surface phenomenon that gives evidence of the basic structural transformations that made the exchange possible in the first place” (Conrad 2016: 69–70). Grasping these transformations requires careful historical contextualization and consideration of the fact that Europeans conceived their colonies and the lands they sought to colonize “not in some purely predetermined terms, but through their dealings with local interlocutors” (Subrahmanyam 2017: 212, 103–143; cf. the instructive case studies in Manning & Rood 2016 and Manning & Owen 2018). In premodern as well as modern times – if clear lines between such periods can indeed be drawn – historical debates and exchanges leading to the emergence and shaping of notions such as “religion” were linked to local developments that need to be considered.

This leads us to the second aspect. Many historians and scholars of religion would agree that, to paraphrase Shalini Randeria, understandings of modernity have developed, not in separation but as part of an entangled, shared history (Randeria 1999: 87). In the words of Elaine Fisher, modernity should be perceived as a phenomenon that emerged through global exchanges between multiple regions (Fisher 2017: 16). As Conrad (2016: 57) argues, this decentralized perspective of entanglement should not be confused with the idea of the emergence of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2002), “multiple secularities” (Burchardt et al. 2015), or similar approaches (cf. Maltese 2018: 149–152).

It would also be misleading to regard modernity as a process of homogenization, as it went hand in hand with rejections, conflicts, and controversial negotiations. “Non-Western” actors participated in these processes, which should not be regarded as a unilateral diffusion or “transmission” of European knowledge (Tschacher 2009: 49). Insisting that “modernity has a global history,” Peter van der Veer argued that Indians were not passive recipients of concepts such as modernity, religion, or the secular, but that they “were actively

involved in shaping them" (Veer 2001: 7, 160; cf. Schröder 2016). This aspect bears emphasis, as global history is sometimes accused of an exaggeration of similarities and convergences, resulting not only in the superficial talk of ubiquitous connections and globality, but also in narratives of global homogenization (Drayton & Motadel 2018: 7–13; cf. Manjapra 2014; Strube: forthcoming-a). As a consequence, some historians, including van der Veer, distanced themselves from certain forms of global history because of their supposed tendencies to assume a "world-systemic teleology" and to neglect that "the story of increasing integration and unification obscures the coexisting tale of increasing disintegration and disunity along ethnic and religious lines that we find everywhere" (Veer 2001: 8–11). Global religious history is well prepared to consider such nuances and apparent contradictions, as it takes into account the ruptures, discontinuities, and dislocations that defy any teleological understanding of history and a narrow focus on European actors.

Again, this must not entail a neglect of the vast differences in power between "the West and the Rest" (Hall 1992). Global religious history demands continuous self-reflection on the part of those who today, especially within a European context, write history. Thus, global historians might follow specific connections with an explicit and self-reflected intent to unravel and question power relations that are concealed by essentialisms, hierarchizations, and binaries. This requires crafting a comprehensible narrative that results from the interpretation of disorderly, often contradictory and ambiguous data, while being aware that the narrative is not free of selection and exclusion owing to the historian's own cognitive interests and positionality (cf. Certeau 1988: 86–99).

Since we work with historical sources in diverse languages, reflecting on the act of *translation* is crucial for proposing a resolution to the politically connoted conflict between "indigenous" and "global" approaches (Strube: forthcoming-a). Lydia Liu has argued that translation should not be viewed as the production of equivalents in two different languages, but that the equivalence of two terms becomes possible and is, in fact, *produced* in a specific historical context (see Bachmann 2021, in this issue). This is not simply the outcome of either innovation within "indigenous tradition" or foreign impact; neither is it a rupture between tradition and modernity, but a product of cross-cultural interpretation. Instead of assuming the incommensurability between languages, but also instead of assuming the complete translatability of concepts, Liu proposes to understand translation as a historical pragmatic practice (Liu 1995: xix, 2, 19). An investigation of that translanguing practice, then, focuses on the *conditions* for the possibility of translation (Liu 1995: 5–6, 10; cf. Liu 1999a: 137). Liu's perspective thus helps to understand the "global circulatory networks of translated knowledge" that were shaped by different actors

despite the power asymmetries inherent to the colonial context (Liu 1999a: 128; Liu 1999b: 5; cf. Hermann 2015: 219–232; Krämer 2017: 9–12; Krämer 2020; cf. Moyn & Sartori 2013: 11–13). What can be observed in the articles of this issue is not a meeting of “Western” and “non-Western” religion. Rather, different understandings of religion were *produced* and *constantly negotiated* through global exchanges during the nineteenth century. As a whole, we aim to understand the historical conditions for these processes.

5 Genealogy

As indicated earlier, a genealogical approach to these issues is especially rewarding because it helps to avoid the ideological trappings of Eurocentric diffusionist and/or transmission models. Even if implicitly, a genealogy retains a focus on the present that requires historians to reflect on their own positionality, including individual bias and ideological assumptions (Foucault 1984: 80–81, 89–91). Borrowing an expression by Talal Asad, a genealogy can be seen as “a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties” (Asad 2003: 16). A genealogical perspective is fundamentally critical in the Kantian sense (cf. Stengel 2019). By consistently asking what connections exist between today’s global use of religion, Islam, Hinduism, and so on, it avoids essentialist quarrels about origins and authenticity (Bergunder 2014: 275–279; cf. Maltese 2017: 605–606; Maltese et al. 2019: 8; Asprem & Strube 2021b: 3–4; Asprem & Strube 2021a: 243, 247; Strube 2021a: 60). Global religious history departs from the assumption that European knowledge is “now everybody’s heritage” (Chakrabarty 2000: 16, 255). Through colonialism and imperialism, it has undeniably spread across the globe through vastly asymmetric power relations (Eckert & Randeria 2009: 11). Yet, this does not mean that “religion” was clearly defined within “Western” contexts, or that it remained “Western” in the process. It is vital to acknowledge that meanings of religion have been radically transformed, or outright emerged, during the peak of colonialism. This also implies that said transformations or emergences owe themselves to global conditions.

This further underscores how misleading it would be to postulate an “indigenous” epistemology independent from and incommensurable with a European one (Maltese 2018: 149–152; Strube: forthcoming-a). Such an assumption is problematic in at least two ways. First, the postulation of incommensurability reintroduces a structural Eurocentrism, in that it exoticizes “non-Westerners.” Secondly, it raises the question on what grounds such an incommensurability can be ascertained, as any verdict of incommensurability presupposes a

common point – a *tertium comparationis* – from which said verdict is made, even if that point is created by the researchers. Put differently, incommensurability presupposes commensurability of some kind. As Bergunder, drawing on Jonathan Z. Smith, puts it, comparison does not directly relate an element A to an element B in order to investigate similarities and differences between the two. Comparisons are never dyadic – they are always triadic. There is always an implicit surplus and there is always some “in relation to.” In academic comparisons, the “in relation to” is most often the interest of the scholars – their research question, theories, or models (Bergunder 2020: 57).

This “in relation to” is what in formal logics is usually referred to as *tertium comparationis*. Smith emphasizes that such a *tertium comparationis*, which is constitutive for any intelligible comparison, must be established before the operation of comparing A with B. It is this point of comparison that creates a relationship between two (or more) elements and enables the operation in which they are compared. Put differently, any comparison is preceded by and contingent on the previous determination of a point of comparison. Therefore, what warrants a comparison is the plausibility with which the very point of comparison is justified – and this has significant “political” implications, in the sense that the point of comparison depends on the respective interests of the researchers (including their “mere” scholarly interests) (Bergunder 2020: 57).

While global religious history rejects what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000:50) calls “History 1” – namely the idea of a universal history of “religion” based on the assumption that “religion” is a universal category that does not entail power asymmetries – it also rejects the idea that current research can simply access “authentic indigenous knowledge” by focusing on precolonial data or an approach that brackets Europe altogether (see Maltese 2021, in this issue). In our view, what is often referred to as indigenous epistemology, knowledge or worldview is the product of negotiation and difference, which is always both ambivalent and tied to the researchers’ interests (cf. Bhabha 2004: 19, 37–38, 49–56; Maltese 2018: 149–152; Strube 2021a: 57). Our goal is to understand how historical exchanges under colonialism inform our present perspectives. In the words of Chakrabarty (2000: 42–43), we attempt “to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it.” It follows that the history of colonialism and imperialism is more complex than a unilateral act of appropriation. European or Western identities, too, have formed through an ambivalent dependency on, and interactions with, the perceived other (Strube: forthcoming-a; Conrad & Randeria 2013: 51–52; Veer 2001: 3–13; Chidester 1996: xiii). As Timothy Fitzgerald has pointed out, this specifically applies to the meaning of religion (Fitzgerald 2007: 9). That postcolonial studies, as Robert Yelle has pointed out,

have paid relatively scarce attention to “the religious dimension of colonialism” is hence highly significant (Yelle 2013: 4–5).

In sum, although we share with postcolonial and decolonial approaches the concern of writing a narrative that is not centered on Europe, we dispute that this concern is served through establishing an alternative center and argue for decentering knowledge production on religion. Following Judith Butler (1995: 135), we contend that scholars do not stand “*outside* the discursive conventions” entrenched in power asymmetries (Butler 1995: 135). Thus, any approach that aims at criticizing History 1 should “produce a reading” that arrests the “thrust of such universal histories” by “producing the concrete as a combination of the universal logic of History 1 and the heterotemporal horizons of innumerable History 2s” – as Chakrabarty (2008: xvii) puts it in the preface to a later edition – rather than “put aside” religion altogether as a supposedly European concept (Ahmed 2016: 223). From this vantage point, assuming an indigenous epistemology that can be assessed apart from a history of Europe in terms of a “vernacular history” equals what Chakrabarty (2008: xvii) calls “criticisms from ‘nowhere.’” It ultimately assumes that it is possible to eclipse the colonial sedimentations and power dynamics that still affect scholars’ positionality (see Maltese 2021, in this issue).

In this sense, genealogy takes the researcher’s own embeddedness in power relations as its point of departure, as it makes transparent both the researcher’s specific cognitive interest (*Erkenntnisinteresse*) (Habermas 1972: 197–198) as well as the points of comparison used to assess historical data. In our case, this interest lies in exploring the historical conditions (power relations, implicit exclusions, claims of equivalence, etc.) that make hegemonic claims in today’s knowledge production possible (Maltese 2019b: 16). Methodologically speaking, then, global religious history asks *when* and *where* signifiers like “religion” are used *by whom* and *in engagement with/demarcation from whom*.

6 Poststructuralist Epistemology

How can we theorize a critical reflection of the relationship between researchers, the global history of the epistemological presuppositions that guide the researchers’ gaze, and the data the researchers interpret? While we emphasize that different answers are possible, we propose an epistemology that is significantly informed by the work of Ernesto Laclau (cf. Bergunder 2014: 259–269). Laclau theorized how the same words can mean different things to different people. Informed by Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist semiotics, he conceptualized language as an infinite “play of differences,” which, like any

signification system, is constituted by a radical openness. From this perspective, “there are no positive terms in language, only differences – something is what it is only through its differential relations to something else” (Laclau 2005: 68–69). A word or action “is what it is” only by being different from other possible signifying elements (words or actions) (Laclau 2005: 68). In poststructuralist terminology: there is no stable, naturally given outside from which signifying elements draw their meaning – there is no fixed link between signifier and signified (Derrida 1997: 50). If “religion,” “postsecularity,” “Christianity,” “West,” “modernity,” etc. mean different things to different people, this is so because they have no ontological status *per se*. This begs the question: if language is an open system, how does communication work?

In the absence of a “transcendental signified,” meaning is only possible if the “infinite play of differences” is given a limit, if the floating of the elements is arrested (Laclau et al. 2001: 112; Laclau 1990: 140). If “there is no beyond the play of differences, no ground which would a priori privilege some elements” over others, then the circumstance that an element acquires meaningfulness “has to be explained by the play of differences as such” (Laclau 2005: 69). In other words, whatever arrests the “infinite play” must come from within the “differential ensemble.” This occurs when a particular difference is expelled and comes to represent pure negativity. Signification, therefore, is not dependent on a transcendental entity, but the result of the expulsion of an element from within the differential ensemble. If an element from within the endless play of differences is made to represent a radical other, then all remaining elements become different vis-à-vis the expelled – hence, they acquire an identity. Inversely, if the radical “other” owes itself to an expulsion, the expulsion is not only the condition for the possibility of signification, but also the condition for the possibility of the subversion of signification – hence, the plurality of meanings. Put differently, if the element arresting the endless fluidity comes from *within*, the operation of expulsion is also the condition for the impossibility of final or absolute signification (Laclau 2005: 69–70). Thus, the boundary that limits the discourse is “always on the brink of collapse” (Maltese 2019b: 17).

How, then, can we theorize the moment in which a particular discursive element is expelled so that it represents pure negativity? If we agree that signification does not occur in a social vacuum (X only has a significate if it means something *for* somebody); that no social context is free from power asymmetries; that power asymmetries are coterminous with demands; and that any social context is constituted by identities – then we should look at the relationalities that constitute said context for an answer. This directs our focus to the nexus of identity(-making)-demands, since there are no relations without identities: a discursive element is made to represent pure negativity

when it is used to mark a demarcation based on the articulation of demands within an antagonistic formation. Signification resulting from expulsion is hence an operation of power – a hegemonic act (cf. Maltese 2019b: 17). This is what Laclau (2005: 65–70) calls the making of an “empty signifier” – a signifier which is not empty in the sense that it has no meaning, but in the sense that it allows a plurality of particular positions to identify with a particular struggle on the promise that it will meet the totality of their particular interests. As such, an empty signifier identifies anything that threatens this struggle as an antagonist and produces a “we” – an operation which Laclau calls “constructing the ‘people’” – even if such a construction is highly precarious (cf. Maltese 2019a: 89).

To anticipate a possible objection, this epistemological foundation of global religious history should not be understood as relativistic or radical constructivist. This is so because signification is constitutively tied to the (discursive) community for whom X means Y (Butler 1993: 6–16). The diverse, even contradictory, meanings with which signifiers are invested are neither arbitrary nor completely unrelated to other meanings. They are the product of sedimentations that are open for scrutiny. They are not isolated particularities but depend on how the signifiers are used by those who are perceived as predominant in the discourse in which the demarcation occurs: local resignifications of signifiers such as “religion,” “witchcraft,” “nationality,” “ethnicity,” etc. have to build on the sedimented naming practices of those whose articulations or positioning ought to be intelligible. This is what Butler (1993: 14–15, 21–22), following Derrida, calls a “citation” that reifies the discourse from which it is taken, and yet is never identical with itself due to the historical singularity of the context in which it is cited.

Another possible objection could be that such an approach denies subalterns their agency, because it views any act as tied to discursive elements in the sense that any “new” act draws on or elements that are part of a discourse. Since a discourse, understood in poststructuralist terms, is constituted by groups that occupy a hegemonic position, so the critique goes, subaltern or “indigenous” agency cannot be grasped (Butler 1995: 133–135). We contend that arguing for an “indigenous” agency separate from any encounters with Europe presupposes a false dilemma between intentionalism and structuralism (Maltese 2019b: 19). Instead, we understand agency as “located within the possibility of a variation” on a “repetition” of signifying discursive elements (Butler 1995: 135). To stress repetition means to take seriously that “there is no possibility of standing *outside* the discursive conventions by which ‘we’ are constituted, but only the possibility of reworking the very conventions by which we are enabled” (Butler 1995: 135). In other words, citation does not preclude

agency, rather it is its precondition; citation is always open to resignification, because any old “text” depends on a new context, if it is to be meaningful as *citation*. Thus, agency is “not a function of an individual’s intention but is an effect of historically sedimented linguistic conventions,” an “effect of discursive conditions” that “do not control its use; it is not a transcendental category, but a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting relations” (Butler 1995: 134–135).

A third possible objection could be that an approach that focuses on antagonisms entails a Carl Schmittian political theory. This is not the case. Certainly, the choice of an epistemology in which antagonism and social asymmetries are central is deliberate. It owes itself to the overt and explicit “cognitive interest” (*Erkenntnisinteresse*) which, as noted above in relation to Eurocentrism and nationalist historiographies, is critical from the outset (Maltese 2019b: 16). Unless we assume that our research takes place in a social context that is free from or unaffected by power relations that manifest themselves as antagonism, we cannot regard antagonism as secondary. Thus, the notion of antagonism underlying the epistemology of global religious history is to be understood as “vis-à-vis-ness embedded in a social context constituted by power asymmetries” (Maltese 2019b: 17). It does not entail any essentialist friend/foe identification whatsoever. On the contrary, it argues that identifications which come along through the evocation of “names” – like religion, Islam, and so on (Maltese 2019a: 79–82; Maltese 2021) – are precarious, subject to negotiation, and always at the brink of collapse (Neher 2014). From this perspective, the researcher’s task can be framed according to the following three aspects: firstly, the conditions that enabled the specific use of names like “religion,” “modernity,” “West,” “Hinduism,” “witchcraft,” etc., must be investigated; secondly, we must analyze the demarcation processes and antagonisms in which specific “names” were used; thirdly, as a result, we will have access to new perspectives on how these demarcation processes affect hegemonic discourses today.

7 Overview of the Contributions

The articles and response essay collected in this special issue demonstrate how global religious history can be made fruitful for the contextualization of concrete historical developments within a global framework. The contributions are the outcome of a panel on global religious history, organized in 2019 at the annual meeting of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Religionswissenschaft (German Society for Religious Studies). They range from the nineteenth (the first three) through the twentieth to the twenty-first century (the latter three)

and cover the broad geographical contexts of Europe, South Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and North America. In their own ways, all articles display how global religious history can be operationalized, depending on the specific subject and data under investigation. Unavoidable reductions, limitations, and other methodological challenges are explicitly reflected.

Yan Suarsana's "Religionizing Christianity" (2021) offers a historical approach to religious studies, oriented towards a consistent historicization based on a reinterpretation of poststructuralism. Suarsana focuses on the concept of Christianity found in the theological discourse of representatives of cultural Protestantism (such as Albrecht Ritschl, as well as his students Ernst Troeltsch, Adolf von Harnack, and Martin Rade), which views Christianity as an internalized religion of the individual. Suarsana's main thesis is that this discourse developed simultaneously to global negotiations of religion. Reflecting on Ritschl's reception of Friedrich Schleiermacher's concept of "inner religion," Suarsana detects substantial differences between Ritschl's reception and that of his later students, in that it displays a much more collective, cultic, and communitarian understanding of Christian religion. Assessing this difference as a product of a specific discourse that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Suarsana calls for a revision of widespread assumptions that Neo-Hinduism was the product of a concept of religion exported from the "West." Rather, Suarsana holds, Hinduism and Christianity were both *concurrent* products of the same globally negotiated religious discourse.

In a similar way, Julian Strube's "Rajnarayan Basu and His 'Science of Religion'" (2021b) argues that the emergence of religious studies can only be fully grasped against the background of global exchanges and connections. Strube focuses on debates about Hindu identity in nineteenth-century Bengal, as they become tangible through "reformist" movements such as the Brāhma Samāj and their clash with self-declared "orthodox" or "revivalist" societies (*sabhās*). This serves him to illustrate the complex relationship between reform, revivalism, and supposedly "Western" actors such as the members of the Theosophical Society and scholars such as Friedrich Max Müller. Tracing various controversies about the meaning of "Hindu dharma" within the context of increasing nationalist sentiment arising especially since the 1870s, Strube argues for the centrality of the notion of *sanātana dharma*, which was propagated as the eternally valid teachings of the "Aryan" forefathers. A major point of reference for the legitimation of *sanātana dharma* was "modern Western science," which was presented as inferior to the wisdom of the ancient Aryans. In this endeavor, Indian intellectuals found enthusiastic allies among the Theosophists, which had arrived in India in 1879 and maintained close ties to the "reformist" Brahmos. They also entered dialogue with contemporary

orientalists such as Müller, thus contributing to the emergence of a “science of religion,” or *Religionswissenschaft*. This runs contrary to widespread assumptions that result from a binary dichotomy between Indian and European historical actors, or the idea that Indians simply “appropriated” European ideas. Rather, Strube calls for an investigation of all participants on these global exchanges in their own right, thus demonstrating their interdependency.

Jörg Haustein’s “Global Religious History as Rhizome” (2021) focuses on three methodological challenges that global historians encounter in their intent to decenter European influence in debates about the meaning of religion. Firstly, he argues, investigations of the conceptualization of religion tend to focus on writing subjects and their intentions, with a corresponding tendency to simplify complex collective processes. Secondly, global historians seem to map novelty and discontinuity for the sake of argument, at the expense of short-circuiting complex and intricate developments. Thirdly, while global histories of religion seek to break with the reification of religious essence, their historical investigations often entail the reification of concepts: a certain idea of “religion” is shown to have emerged at a particular historical juncture. The article explores the potential of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s epistemological metaphor of the rhizome by applying it to what Haustein calls a rhizomatic configuration par excellence: the circulation of a global Muslim chain letter in German East Africa and its multiple effects, including colonial notions of “political Islam.”

Giovanni Maltese’s “Islam Is Not a ‘Religion’” (2021) is also concerned with the relationship between conceptualizations of Islam and of religion and its effect on debates and policies tackled as “political Islam.” Maltese’s article begins with the assumption of recent Islamicists that the use of “religion” entails a Eurocentric bias, and with their plea to discard it as a conceptual tool in the study of Islam, or to use the “Qur’ānic term” *dīn* instead. Analyzing how Fazl-ur-Rahman Ansari (a little known yet influential Muslim intellectual based in Peninsular Malaya and the Straits Settlements) conceptualized Islam and religion in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Maltese presents a threefold argument. Firstly, he argues that a global religious history approach informed by poststructuralist epistemology and a theory of hegemony is better suited to address the problem of Eurocentrism in both religious studies and Islamic studies. Secondly, Maltese challenges the scholarly thesis that twentieth-century Southeast Asian intellectual debates which referred to Islam as religion were mere emulators of debates conducted in the “West.” Rather he shows how non-Europeans based in Southeast Asia actively and creatively engaged in said debates conceptualizing Islam vis-à-vis the discourse about the “political supremacy of the West” and a “perceived backwardness of Muslims”

worldwide. Furthermore, he shows how the current use of and debates about conceptualizations of Islam as/and religion within and without scholarship should be viewed as the product of one and the same discourse – a result of global negotiation processes in which Europeans were as involved as Southeast Asia-based non-Europeans, even if they did not speak from the same position of power. Thirdly, Maltese argues that global religious history may open fresh perspectives on contemporary Malaysian politics vis-à-vis debates about political Islam.

Judith Bachmann's "African Witchcraft and Religion Among the Yoruba" (2021) takes West African witchcraft as an entry point into global religious history to show how critical translation theories can help us move beyond essentialized ideas about Africa and Europe. Bachmann begins with looking at how self-identified witches have demanded the public acknowledgement of witchcraft as "religion" in Nigeria. These political debates are reflected in a long-ongoing scholarly discussion about whether "witchcraft" in Africa should be regarded as religion or not. Whereas this discussion concerns the quest for African meanings at its core, Bachmann proposes to focus on translingual practice, which she holds to be the reason for today's perception of "African" and "European" differences as incommensurable. Tracing back today's understanding of witchcraft among the Yoruba (*àjé*), Bachmann identifies the *Alatinga* anti-witchcraft movement of the early 1950s as the nodal point of Yoruba witchcraft history. Against this background, she proposes to view Yoruba witchcraft concepts as products of a globally entangled developments – only in the aftermath of the *Alatinga*, a hybrid movement, did the need arise to demarcate "African" and "European" meanings. Hence, Yoruba translingual practice has also affected European understandings of religion and witchcraft today.

Dimitry Okropiridze's "Religion, Science, and Common Sense" (2021) explores how global religious history can shed new light on current debates about postsecularity. Okropiridze's entry point is the observation that the discourse on religion and science as two incommensurable yet inescapable forces of human societies has been predominantly perceived as an ontological expression – as a self-supporting historical reality showing itself to the passive observer. The potential of global religious history according to Okropiridze lies in its capability to reveal said discursive presentation as a normative fixation by active interpreters within an epistemologically fluent and complex historical context of local and global articulations. While being decipherable as a normative positing with a Eurocentric genealogy, the conflictual discourse on religion and science should be viewed as a potent globalized *dispositif*: an apparatus of socially institutionalized and demandable ways of linguistic and non-linguistic iterations. Ultimately, it shapes the reality, not only of active

discourse participants, but of all individuals, collectives, and institutions in its gravitational field. To unfold his argumentation, Okropiridze focuses on the work of Jürgen Habermas as well as the contemporary influence of the Intellectual Dark Web (IDW), a formation of conservative and libertarian intellectuals and public figures. Thus, he shows how, on the one hand, members of the IDW (among them self-declared atheists, agnostics, and religious practitioners) are entangled with normative notions of religion and secularity as they argue for or against the importance of religious and scientific world views. On the other hand, the IDW's interventions in public discourse are actively changing societal notions of religion and secularity and are thereby (re)writing global history in the present.

Rounding up the discussion, Michael Bergunder (2021) offers a reply that addresses common objections as well as theoretical and methodological problems of global religious history, and proposes some avenues along which these can be met. In sum, these contributions demonstrate how global religious history can advance our understanding of how historical and present-day actors have defined religion as well as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, witchcraft, or esotericism, looking at how these signifiers *were and are discussed globally*. If scholars aim at understanding these discussions, it is crucial to expand the scope of research beyond Anglo-European sources and contexts. Thus, the debates scrutinized in this issue, we hope, may open new ways of looking at how scholarship specialized in religion in North America and Europe can be constructively related to African, South, and Southeast Asian contexts. More than shedding light on historical sources and their contexts per se, these insights also help to understand present academic and public debates about religion and its relation to the knowledge-power nexus from a more theoretical angle. They allow for reflection on how we interpret sources and produce knowledge in face of historical divisions between East and West, colonizer and colonized, notions of race and nation, orientalism, and religious conflicts. We hope that this issue raises such critical questions and may further the discussion on how to approach them.

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