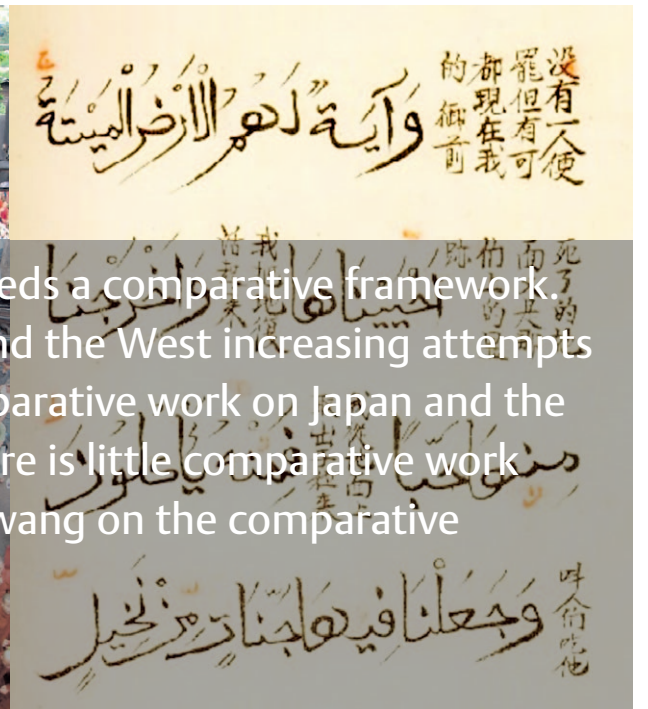
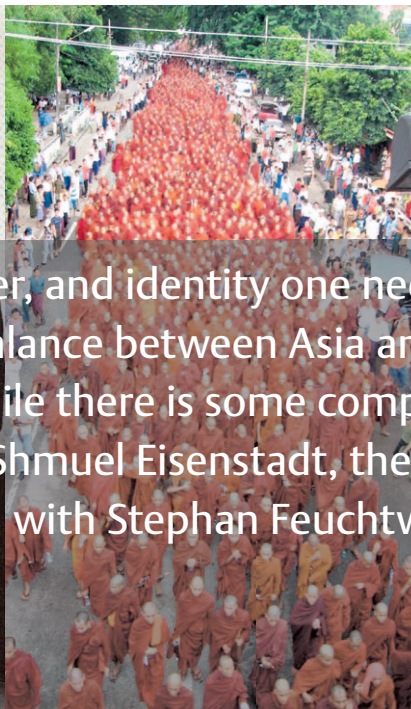
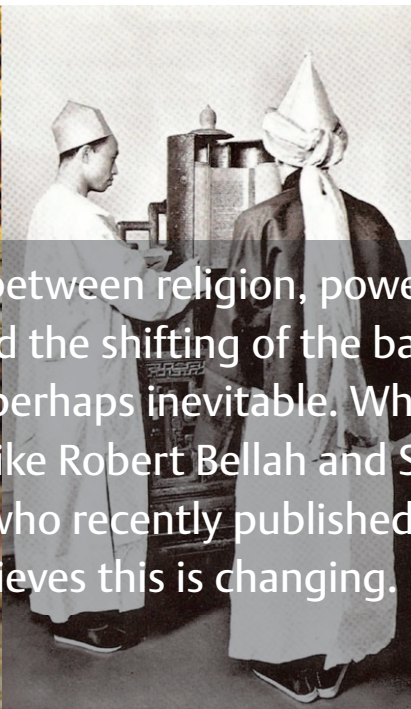
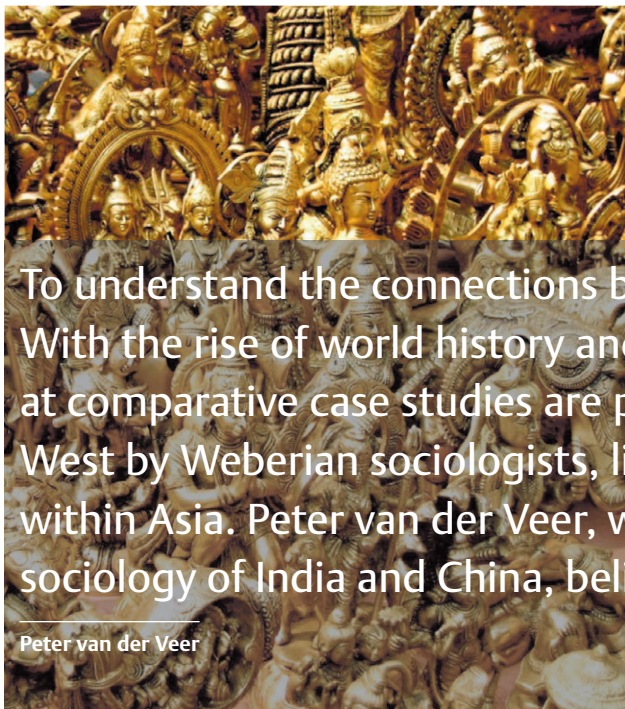


# The value of comparison



To understand the connections between religion, power, and identity one needs a comparative framework. With the rise of world history and the shifting of the balance between Asia and the West increasing attempts at comparative case studies are perhaps inevitable. While there is some comparative work on Japan and the West by Weberian sociologists, like Robert Bellah and Shmuel Eisenstadt, there is little comparative work within Asia. Peter van der Veer, who recently published with Stephan Feuchtwang on the comparative sociology of India and China, believes this is changing.

Peter van der Veer

RATHER THAN FOCUSING on the comparison of India and China, in this article I would like to discuss conceptual problems. When politicians in India or China say that they want to bring Hindu identity or Confucian harmony back into politics one may wonder whether these aspects of politics have ever been away. One can be certain that these politicians want, in fact, to bring about change instead of returning to the past. Similarly, when American politicians want to spread religious freedom all over the world one may understand this as part of a global expansion of human rights, but one can also be certain that it is connected to the political influence of evangelical networks in the US. At the most general level one might assert that there is a religious revival in many parts of the world, but not without wondering where religion has been all the time when it was not yet 'revived'. At the same time, one needs to be very cautious with the notion of the politicisation of religion, since religion is always political, always concerns power, including the definition of power. When Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, Burma and Tibet take to the streets to resist the state they are 'doing politics'. I would suggest that it is wrong to see that as something that does not fit their renunciation, that is against their religion brought about by extreme circumstance. Rather, I would argue that Buddhism is just as political as all the other religions.

To understand the connections between religion, power, and identity one needs a comparative framework. In fact, our work is always within a comparative frame. However, in general there is not enough reflection on the extent to which our approaches depend on arguing and comparing with the already existing literature on a topic (my early work on pilgrimage was entirely framed by the comparison of my field results with those of Louis Dumont, Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller), on the use of terms that have emerged in entirely different historical situations and thus carry in them implicit comparison (like middle class or bourgeoisie, like religion), and also on the ways in which those we study themselves are constantly comparing the present with the past or their situation with that of others. To claim, therefore, that one is a sinologist or indologist or africanist and think that specialisation in a region and subject, given sufficient linguistic and cultural competence, is enough to claim mastery over a subject—as if one is not standing constantly in a reflexive relation to both discipline and subject—gives perhaps a certain psychological fortitude, but is untenable.

## A long history of interactions

Comparison is at the heart of cultural analysis. I see comparison not primarily in terms of comparing societies or events, or institutional arrangements across societies, but as a reflection on our conceptual framework, as well as on a history of interactions that have constituted our object of study. One can, for instance, say that one wants to study church-state relations in India and China, but one has to bring to that a critical reflection on the fact that that kind of study already presupposes the centrality of church-like organisations, as well as the centrality of Western secular state formation in our analysis of developments in India and China. That critical reflection often leads to the argument that India and China (and other societies outside the West) should be understood in their own terms, and cannot be understood in Western terms. However, Indian and Chinese terms have to be interpreted and translated in relation to Western scholarship. Moreover, such translation and interpretation are part of a long history of interactions with the West. In the Indian case it is good to realise that English is also an Indian vernacular and in the case of China it is good to realise that communism is not originating from the Song dynasty. This field of comparison has been widely democratised by modern media, so that everyone is in a mediated touch with everyone else and has views on everyone else, mostly in a comparative sense.

Comparison, as I understand it, is not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies but rather, a complex reflection on the network of concepts that both underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. So, it is always a double act of reflection.

None of the terms used in the title of this Newsletter theme—religion, identity, power—are easy. Some scholars would argue that identity is a totally misleading concept (think of Jean-Francois Bayart's *L'illusion identitaire*) and some scholars argue that to, for instance, understand the politics of Indonesia one needs to reflect on the cultural specificity of the concept of power (think of scholars like Clifford Geertz and Benedict Anderson). Whatever one's view of those complexities, most scholars would agree that of the three concepts religion is the most elusive and at the same time most important. Religion is central to the analysis of civilisations, like those of India and China and everything that belongs to the cultural sphere of these great civilisations, like Vietnam, Thailand, Korea and Japan, to mention a few. At the same time, it is central to the analysis of their modernity. Yet it is very hard to understand exactly how the generic term 'religion' can be applied in the analysis of civilisation and modern societies.

It is precisely the emergence and application of the generic term 'religion' as purportedly describing—but in fact producing—a distinctive social field that shows the value of comparison or, perhaps better, the need for comparative reflection. It shows the central importance of the interactions between Europe and its civilisational Others in understanding the emergence of this social field. This is not an argument for the centrality of Europe in world history, but one for the centrality of the interactions between the West and its Others despite the obvious marginality of Westerners in Asia in terms of numbers and otherwise. What I am arguing for here is an interactional approach in which the interactions between Europe and Asia are seen as central to the emergence of modernity in both Asian and European societies. For our understanding of religion and identity politics this approach is fundamental.

In my view, the ideological demarcation and opposition between modern and traditional is very much a 19th century phenomenon, although it has a prehistory from the 16th century onwards and a post-history, in which we realise, to quote Bruno Latour, that we have never been modern. It is in the period of empire-building that the interactions between Europe and Asia are most significant and that the concept of religion comes to play such a central role in the understanding of modernity. In the 19th century, Asian religions like Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and Hinduism are manufactured, constructed and invented in interactions between China and Europe, as well as between India and Europe. At the same time, Christianity and Islam are being re-imagined in their image. It is, of course, not the case that these civilisational traditions did not exist before, but that they are inserted in emerging global understandings and thereby fundamentally changed. In that sense, religion both in Europe and in Asia is a modern phenomenon, despite the long existence of the Catholic Church in Christianity and the authority of the scriptural tradition and its interpreters in all the other religions mentioned. All these religions are gradually nationalised and become part of national identity, as well as globalised and a part of world culture. This is a crucial aspect of becoming modern. Nationalism is an important social and political force everywhere that transforms the traditions that are found in the nation. As both a cultural and political force, nationalism is the most important connection between religion and politics.

Nationalism itself is never self-sufficient, but always relates to an emerging world order of nation-states, even in the imperial phase. The transformation of traditions in the construction of national identity is such a radical rupture in history that it justifies my suggestion that religion is a modern phenomenon. Religion and secularity are simultaneously produced as connected aspects of modernity. Previous scholarship has often opposed the secular and the religious as modern against traditional, but this perspective should be recognised as secularist ideology—as an ideological claim within a particular historical configuration. In that sense, it may have quite real and significant effects, not from the unfolding of a Rational World Spirit but as produced by historical movements and institutions like the state. The secularisation-thesis, a progressive history of the decline of religion and the gradual secularisation of society, does not pay attention to the deep connectedness of secularity and religion and thus cannot account for the contradictions in that progressive history and its lack of empirical evidence in most parts of the world. Still, like other elements of modernisation theory, it is still part of the worldview of modernising elites everywhere.

## Religious encounters

The encounter of Western power with Asian religions in the modern period is one that has been preceded by pre-colonial missionary and political encounters, but also by a long history of the expansion and spread of religious formations within the Asian region. The presence of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in Asia long precedes European expansion. Moreover, there is a long history of expansion and spread of Asian religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism. One could, of course, mention that Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all originate in West-Asia and that they are also Asian religions, but then we would also have to ask from which period 'Asia' is a meaningful category. Obviously, the encounter of Christianity with Islam is of very long standing, as Pope Benedict XVI has recently reminded us when he referred to hostile comments made by a 14th century Byzantine Emperor about Islam, but the encounter of Hinduism and Buddhism with Islam is just as old. There is no objective reason to see Islam and Christianity as not indigenous in Asian societies as against Buddhism and Hinduism, although there is a strong nationalist urge in India, for example, to argue for such a fundamental difference. These ideological claims are far from harmless, as we know from the history of communalism in India as well as from the history of anti-Semitism in Europe.

However long and important the history of religious encounters in Asia may have been, the modern period of imperialism and nationalism provides a specific rupture with the past, because of the externality of imperial power and the ideological emphasis on the difference of modern society from both its own past and from other, so-called 'backward' societies. Comparison and an evolutionary perspective on difference became crucial in the high days of the empire. As Edward Said has rightly argued, the new scientific knowledge of Orientalism also provided the colonised with a new understanding of their traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism were discovered and evaluated by philologists, archaeologists and other historians while traders, missionaries and colonial officers tried to deal with the contemporary forms of these traditions. It is this apparatus of imperial knowledge that has created an archive that is still crucial for any understanding of Asian traditions. It is this archive that needs to be understood if one wants to understand the nature of the modern transformation of religion, both in Asia and in the West.

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